SKINS, SCARS, BLANKETS AND BLOOD

A PICTORIAL RESPONSE TO THE TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS THAT ARISE FROM THE REPRESENTATION AND THE PRACTICE OF *ULWALUKO* IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

Mgcineni Sobopha

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1. PREFACE

Our constantly changing environment has a profound impact on how we do things and perceive 'reality'. In the process of growing up, we define ourselves through cultural practices and values that exist within our families. In other words, we are socialised to understand and interpret the world according to these values. We live in terms of definitions, names, and categories that we create. Through this process of defining, naming, with its consequent categorisations, boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, neighbourhood, and territories within which we live, are created. However, it is the nature of these boundaries, as they become clear when we step outside our conventional day to day conduct, that we begin to question.

Although these boundaries can be questioned as we grow up, these socio-cultural norms and values stay with us (to a greater or a lesser extent) and have a profound influence in our lives, yet they are constantly challenged by external forces we encounter and experience in the street, at school, in the market, work places, and so forth. It is these external influences that alter the individual or the social definition of who we are or what we were taught to be at home. Nimrod Makele states that in "whatever changes we undergo in our behaviour and intellectual life as a result of contact with other people and the sophistication acquired along the way, we always carry with us the emotional baggage of our cultural heritage" (Funani 1990: iv). It is this "emotional baggage of our cultural heritage" Makele speaks of that often poses limitations on our everyday interaction with other people. During this research this 'baggage' has mediated and set the arena for the project.

My parents separated when I was six years old. Throughout my upbringing both my parents were absent as they were working as migrant labourers in Johannesburg. My mother worked as a domestic worker, while my father worked for the Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa from my childhood until 1998. I was born at Engcobo and raised in a Xhosa family in rural Transkei. Due to the absence of both my parents, my grandmother, who by this time was a widow, raised me.

In the process of growing up I had the privilege of spending my life living in both rural and urban settings in South Africa. As I travel between these different spaces I meet and interact with people from different social backgrounds and with diverse

cultural practices. These encounters or external influences were acutely experienced during my studying years at a multi-cultural and multi-racial institution, in this case the University of Cape Town. As I negotiate my existence and identity in both rural and urban spaces, academic and non-academic settings, I have been observer and participant in diverse cultural practices. These passages of experience with their associated debates have shaped much of my life, hence I find it to be a very important part of who I am and how I come to define and identify myself as both a Xhosa and a South African.

2. INTRODUCTION

Human longing for ritual is deep, and in our contemporary culture is often frustrated. As an artist working in such an environment, my close association with these 'visible experiences' or contradictions in life has been the source and stimulus of my creative impulse. *Ulwaluko*[1] is very close to me and an intensely personal aspect of my history and experience. It forms part of my identity and I ascertain very little distance between it and myself, if there can be any. It should be understood that this study is not an anthropological analysis of the Xhosa society and their cultural practices. Rather, it is a combination of autobiography and social commentary in which emphasis on first-hand experience is of primary importance for better understanding of the subject studied. This subjective experience also provides the basis, both conceptual and emotional, of the theoretical and creative process of this body of work. This project premises itself on the contentious issues around *ulwaluko* as practised by the Xhosa society, with particular reference to communities in Engcobo and Cape Town, and the tension in the creative work is rooted in the conflict and debate around this subject. An attempt is made to examine the impact of colonialism in the displacing and disrupting of this traditional Xhosa cultural practice.

Basically this study is a visual response to and an exploration of the tensions and conflicts that arise from the practice of *ulwaluko* and its representation in contemporary South Africa. And more important, it is a reflection of the struggle and the affirmation of the self in relation to my work as an artist. However, due to the complexity and sensitivity of this subject, I cannot generalise my understanding and experience of *ulwaluko* to be that of every Xhosa. The Xhosa people are not a homogeneous group as has been often perceived and discussed in various European discourses that are now under severe criticism by contemporary theorists such as Edward Said.[2] It is a fact that people are different individuals, with dissimilar life experiences. Explaining other people's beliefs and feelings in an objective manner can seem to ignore or does not necessarily take into account, the personal value of emotions, of the joys and sorrows, and even of the transformation of the participants

[1] *Ulwaluko* (the subject of this study) is a Xhosa male initiation or rite of passage normally marked by elaborate ritual ceremonies and authenticated by circumcision.
[2] Said E. W. *Culture and Imperialism*. see selected bibliography.

in the practice analysed. In recent years the practice and the visual representation of *ulwaluko* in South African society, by both 'insiders' and 'outsiders, has stirred concerns and provoked heated moral debates. A good example is that of Steve Hilton-Barber when he exhibited photographs of Sotho initiates at the Market gallery. [3]

My involvement in this project has been marked by heated debates. People responded with mixed feelings to my undergraduate paintings dealing with the subject of *ulwaluko*. It put me in a 'tight spot', especially with some of my contemporaries at times. To quote some of the written responses in the visitor's book in an exhibition at UCT's Centre for African Studies, 'Andile' wrote, "*ulwaluko*/initiation school is our sacred, highly regarded custom. A lot of people have shown curiosity to it; Why?? I mean academics and people in general. It is sacred, back off. Mr Sobopha, show them the core because that is what they want, maybe from here they will leave our custom in harmony and look for something else. But don't you ever go deeper". While 'Lucy' felt that I was patronising to have painted the subject and both wrote and said "Mr. Sobopha I think you need to be told that your work is condescending. You shouldn't [have] painted that, only if you knew the values of our culture/tradition". [4]

Some men during a coming out ceremony at my village in Engcobo threatened me and were vexed when I was taking photographs of an initiation ceremony. One man asked me whether I had ever seen what I was doing done elsewhere. "Has this happened at your own ceremony or is it because, now you are educated and studying with whites, you think you are now cleverer and better than us", were his words. I must say that I had contradictory feelings about what I was doing since during my own initiation I was opposed to people who wanted to document my ceremony.

As a Xhosa adage says "one must first sweep his or her house before going out to sweep other people's houses". It is also said that, "the pot does not see itself, it sees the kettle". Although these two proverbs do not precisely mean the same thing, they both relate to the context of this study. Literally translated they mean that one should

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[3] Market Theatre gallery, Johannesburg, 1990. Hilton-Barber's photographs of a Northern Sotho initiation ceremony elicited an outcry that still resonates in debate around issues of representation today.

[4] *Deadlines*, African Studies' gallery, UCT. 1998. Comments by those who came to view the exhibition by the final year students of Michaelis School of Fine Art.

look at oneself first before passing judgement on others. Hence I find it appropriate, before going out to study or represent cultures that are foreign to me, that I should start by understanding an aspect of my own life, in this instance *ulwaluko*. This belief is driven by the fact that I know and understand what I am talking about as I have experienced the ritual on many different levels. *Ulwaluko* has undergone many changes. The meaning and significance of this ritual practice and the theorisation around it is constantly shifting, taking new forms, as they have been and still are, based on a set of unstable formations. The discourse around *ulwaluko* has always been an unfolding one, responding to changing socio-economic, political and cultural conditions. Heated debates, tensions and conflicts, disagreement and interventions mark these changes or transformations.

In our society the practice and representation of the *ulwaluko* ritual has elicited controversy, tensions and conflicts both in rural and urban settings between the society to whom the ritual belongs and the wider society outside that practice. Though the post–apartheid era has provoked alternative approaches and understandings, the question of power relationships still dominates and frames these debates. Among the key issues of debate are the fatal injuries, infections, illness and mutilation that have become a common occurrence in every initiation season. The involvement of 'outsiders' or the uninitiated (females, whites and so forth) in the ritual adds a further complication to the debate as they are viewed as insensitive to the feelings of the people who practice this ritual. Zolani Mbane's (an interviewee) statement illustrates such concerns when he states that "their approach is not constructive and, in most times, steeped in an attitude of we [the educated and white people in particular] should know better ... an air of superiority". B. B. Mbalu, a 60 year old practising attorney said, "the involvement of white and female doctors defeats the traditional element of the custom and should be avoided by any means possible in order [for the ritual] to be acceptable to the [Xhosa] society".[5]

In stark opposition to this is doctor Mamisa Chabula's (a Xhosa female) concern. She holds that it is her rightful role and responsibility as doctor and parent to be involved as part of the team in finding new ways to deal with the problems that are experienced

[5] Interview with Mbane and Mbalu, Engcobo, Transkei, July 2000.

by the initiates. Some men feel that she has overstepped the boundaries of gender as she ripped off the curtain of secrecy surrounding the procedures of circumcision by proposing the use of the Asian Tara clamps to replace the traditional *uMdlanga.*[6] Hence it is relevant to ask at this critical point in our history and as the number of deaths of initiates increase every day: who has the right to visually, verbally or spiritually represent or to criticise *ulwaluko*? Is there a moral conflict in the ritual practice and its representation both by the insiders and the outsiders? These are some of the concerns that I explore and problematise in this document.

Although there is scant written theoretical material on *ulwaluko*, especially by African scholars (Xhosa authors in particular), there is an abundance of stereotypical literal and visual representations of African people, resonant with the negativity of Eurocentric discourses. These representations are steeped in assumptions and perceptions that are orientated towards advancing the ideology of white supremacy and the domination of African people and their values by both Europeanised African and Western academics. These range from anthropological, historical, and medical studies, to the now widespread media reports that still echo the nineteenth century Eurocentricism that is of little value to a black aspiring African scholar like myself at the present moment. As colonialism took its toll in the 1700s, the Western influence spread over the globe. Euro-Western discourses, Anthropological studies, in particular, developed, in part, to make sense of the diversity of the 'third world' cultures the West encountered. The production of a large body of literal text and documentary ethnographic photography was the task of the colonial administrators, the aim being to observe and describe for their governments the customs and characteristics of the colonised in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

A set of assumptions developed to justify the course of world events such as slavery, and human genocide and that relegated the colonised people to physical, intellectual, cultural, and moral inferiority.[7] Dr. Mathole Motshega states that "these theories are designed to justify centuries of genocide against black peoples, slavery, colonialism and population control policies based on the survival of the fittest, while Africans are

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[6] *UMdlanga* is the traditional assegai used for circumcising Xhosa boys.

[7] Read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Dr David Livingstone's travel notes and publications, and Thomas Baines images(paintings and drawings) of the indigenous people et al.

denied the resources to be fit for the task before them"(2001:2). This dissertation in part touches on and explores some of these issues. My major concern is that we need new perspectives beside that of Euro-American centrism in looking at cultures of the world. It is because of the Western intrusion on *ulwaluko* that, a revered practice is now a superficial public debate with people pouring scorn and ridicule on the ritual. How many of these people really know what happens out there in the 'bush' or are aware of the profound moral and spiritual dimensions of the practice?

My source material has been various anthropological writings, essays, newspaper articles and the few Xhosa books written on the subject, especially that of Z.V. Gitywa, Lumka Funani, Peter Mtuze and H. R. Soga. The major source of information, however, has been drawn from oral material, interviews and debates in both public and private contexts, and my own experience as an observer and active participant in the ritual performance. Informal discussions and interviews with a number of people of various backgrounds, different ages, genders, and especially those of my contemporaries who have been initiated, as well as those who have not, represent the scope of primary sources from which the body of this document is developed. These direct oral processes have offered me an opportunity to explore the subject, in the context of the society, the community and the self.

3. OVERVIEW

Due to the complexity of the topic, this document cannot claim to be doing justice to the subject as such a task will need more elaboration than the scope of this dissertation can include. For better understanding of the problems affecting *ulwaluko* today, it is of crucial importance that one try to understand the social, political, economic and cultural history of the Xhosa people in context. In the section *Historical background* I briefly discuss the history of the Xhosa and the devastating and enriching cultural encounters between Africans and the Europeans. Here an attempt is made to examine the impact of colonisation, the displacement and the fragmentation of the once stable socio-political, economic and cultural systems of the Xhosa people.

The black body in art and ulwaluko is a critical analysis of the use and abuses of the black body as a form of representation in artistic practice and within the context of *ulwaluko* in contemporary South Africa.

In the section *Ulwaluko in context* I discuss *ulwaluko*, and its meanings. Here I neither give nor pretend to be giving a detailed narrative account of the process of *ulwaluko*. If interested in reading further on the subject, R. H. Soga, L. Funani, Z. V. Gitywa and A.T. Goniwe et al. provide valuable reading in this field. [8]

In *Tensions and Conflict* I discuss contemporary issues that arise from the practice of this ritual in our society. Here critical attention is given to the roles of all those who participate in *ulwaluko*, and whose unwavering stand and critical contribution for the success of this "social drama"(initiation) and its meanings is of central importance. Thus, the role and responsibilities of major role players in initiation: *abazali* (parents), *iingcibi* (surgeons), *amakhankatha* (nurses or guardians) and *abakhwetha* (initiates) still need to be thoroughly investigated. I believe that the role of such actors need to be critically examined if we are to overcome these problems, as the successful completion of the ritual depends in part on their combined efforts. The participation of these role-players is of great importance in translating the ritual practice, symbolism and content into the context of contemporary society.

[8] See selected bibliography.

Lastly, *Notes on Practical work* is a discussion of the creative process, methodology and conceptual aspects of my work. However, here I do not give a full analysis and interpretation of the work and its meaning. Rather, I attempt to provide some insights into the drive behind the creative process and the development of the imagery of the material work. For me art objects are autonomous in that they stand for themselves but may arouse different meanings depending on the context as they move from one space to another. As this movement exposes the works to public scrutiny, their meaning shifts depending on the positioning of who is viewing them. This is partly the intention behind my paintings as they are created to speak (as art objects always do) for themselves and embody moments in my own thinking or moments of perception. Yet they are open to different interpretations depending on the viewer's positioning or position. The major intention behind the execution of this work is to provoke questioning and intellectual engagement. Hence it is the viewer who has to prise open or construct his/her meaning by engaging with the work. Hopefully the modest text that I give in this section will facilitate some understanding to those who view the work

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Early black and white encounters

The Xhosa society is one of South Africa's dominant ethnic groups, mostly tracing their roots to the Eastern Cape in the geographical spaces on either side of the Kei river now known as Transkei and Ciskei. Although there is no detailed written history of the Xhosa, before the arrival of the Europeans in South Africa, through oral history it is widely believed by many historians and anthropologists that the Xhosa derive their name from their common ancestor Xhosa who ruled them during the 1500s. They are composed of different groups such as the Thembu, Mpondo, Bhaca, Mfengu, Hlubi, Bomvane, Nhlangwini and Mpondomise. These groups are made up of various clans related to each other by kinship ties that were traditionally based on affiliation to a hereditary chief who had jurisdiction over a defined area of land. These clans are identified by their clan names that are often traced through male lineage. For example the AmaZizi, AmaTshawe, AmaJumba, AmaMqwathi, AmaMpinga, AmaQhinebe, AmaNyawuza clan etc, maintained as a reference to a group with a male as an inheritor. With the exception of some of the Pondo people, most of the Xhosa people are known for practising *ulwaluko.* This ritual is regarded as one of the major and sacred institutions that are significant in the growth of a Xhosa male into becoming a full social being. It is fundamental to the strengthening of the lineage's existence, its continuity and the identity of the individual and the society.

Since their first arrival, the white people perceived and presented the settlement of the African people as a controversial issue. Black and white encounters are woven within a history of European dominance that brought about many changes in the lives and cultures of the Xhosa people. Since the first European settlement, tensions and cultural conflicts marked the socio-economic and political relations between indigenous black people and the white settlers in South Africa. Soga states that the Xhosa people "came into conflict with the Portuguese ...along the seaboard of the Indian Ocean under their great leader Xhosa"(1936:9). Towards the end of the 18th century relations between the Xhosa and the European settlers had become increasingly coercive replicating earlier patterns established in the relations between the first Europeans and Khoikhoi.

Manaka observes that "the 1800's [was] a turbulent and war-torn period characterised by wars and migrations" (1987:11). Disputes concerning land tenure, grazing, stock theft, plundering of possessions and the transgression of boundaries precipitated the tragic 'wars of resistance' in which the Xhosa lost ownership of their material wealth and fertile lands. Crais echoes this when he says the 1781 war "ended the last chapter of [Xhosa] resistance, [and] was indicative of the more general decline of Xhosa/European relations...[as] Commando raids traditionally made on Khoikhoi and hunter-gatherers were turned on the Xhosa, capturing their cattle and taking captives [and their land]" (1992: 48). On top of these disastrous defeats suffered by the Xhosa against the white people the Nongqawuse cattle killing episode of 1856-7 represented the annihilation and death of Xhosa resistance against white colonial rule.[9]

In their efforts to justify their historical presence, claims, and exploitation of the land of the colonised, the white man fabricated and distorted the facts about the history of the black people.[10] Steve Biko states that,

> ... in an effort to destroy completely the structures that had been built in the African society and to impose their imperialism with an unnerving totality the colonialists were not satisfied merely with holding a people in their grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content, they turned to the past of the oppressed people and distorted, disfigured and destroyed it (1978: 29).

With the help of the new technological developments (industrial revolution and scientific studies) Western domination over the colonised people took a new swing. The Europeans "manufactured unscientific and contradictory theories to denigrate the African and his theories of becoming which are scientific and are affirmed by archeoastronomy and ancient literature" (Motshekga 2001:2). For instance, anthropology in the 1800s played a big role in and facilitated the establishment of European assumptions about the colonised people, which have led to racial ideologies that still confront our modern world.

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[9] It is said, Nongqause the daughter of Mhlakaza prophesied the destruction of the white people. In her vision the ancestors instructed the Xhosa to kill all their cattle and not plant any crops for a certain period after which the ancestors would come and drive the white people into the sea and there would be no more white trouble. Kreli the then leader decreed that people observe this prophecy which most did. This led to the most devastating poverty and division among the Xhosa people as the vision proved to be false.

[10] For example most South African history books purport that the history of the black people in South Africa begins with the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652.

Salah Hassan states that the rise of social sciences such as anthropology and psychology,

> which emerged during the late 19th century as an extension of European colonialism, ... the advances in medical science,enabled statisticians and artists alike to quantify and visually record physical difference between European explorers and the "exotic" peoples they encountered on their journeys [and] gave impetus to the domination of the colonised people (1997:26- 27).

In South Africa the discovery of minerals in the 19th century further dispossessed the black African people, not only of the land and wealth but also control over their own lives. Not only did the European settlers plunder the Xhosa *imizi* (households), but they also became involved in the segmentary politics of that Xhosa society. In an effort to destroy the Xhosa political system of effective control, during his premiership in South Africa Sir George Grey, in a calculated plan to crush Xhosa resistance to British rule deposed unco-operative chiefs and replaced them with salaried cohorts. These pseudo-chiefs, assisted the government-appointed European magistrates in the running of the Xhosa people's affairs. Amongst many examples king Sabatha Dalindyebo[11] of the Thembu in Transkei was stripped of his paramouncy by the white Nationalist government because he supported anti-white rule as was reflected by his opposition of 'Bantustans policy' of the apartheid regime under the Nationalist Party.

After independence from British rule black people of the Union of South Africa were once more robbed, as the imposition of the notorious Land Act of 1913 by the Afrikaner-led South African government, further reduced the land ownership many black families previously had access to under the English crown. Through this act 90% of South Africa's black population was squashed into a mere 13 percent of land and the 87% remaining for the privileged minority of white inhabitants. The painful history of forced removals of black people from land marked exclusively for white people is noted by Sol Plaatje who in his book *Native Life in South Africa* states that, "on the morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth" (1916:13).

[11] Thembu paramount chief banned by the former Transkei homeland government and died in exile in Zambia in the 1980's and reburied in 1987 at Bumbane Great place.

By the mid 1930s this act was reinforced culminating in the establishment of the 'bantustans' or 'homelands' for the black population.[12]

Through the resultant poverty and the new tax rules imposed by the settlers' government on black people they were forced to seek work on white farms and urban areas to earn money to be able to pay taxes and feed their families.[13] The industrial revolution in South Africa's mining industry led to an unprecedented demand for unskilled and cheap labour in both the urban areas and the countryside - in both the mines and on the farms. The mining enterprise gave rise to a high need for cheap labour and led to the introduction of the 'migrant labour system'. The urbanisation and the ever-increasing influx of labour from rural areas led to an unprecedented spreading, scattering and fragmentation of Xhosa families, as many had no option but to join the ranks of the migrant labour system. Soon this migrant labour system came not to only affect men. Women and their children soon joined their husbands as house workers or domestic workers on white farms, shops, and in the mines etc. countrywide. The migrant labour system had devastating effects that precipitated the widespread separation of many families, and extended families, and weakened social values and bonds among many black people and communities.[14] Through this migrant labour system the loss of a male as family head was acutely experienced and had a profound impact on the life of the African child, resulting in acute social disorientation.[15]

Missionary education and its impact.

Many contemporary critics such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Eddie Chambers, Gen Doy, and Afrocentrist scholars like Molefe Kete Asante, agree that colonialism triumphed with the help of Christianity. "In the west [the] white superiority complex assumed the leadership of the world at the beginning of the Christian era and have

[12] Through this law black people were stripped of their citizenship and domiciled to new independent states as their homelands according to their ethnicity. Transkei became the first independent homeland in 1976.

[13] In their need for cheap labour in the mines and on farms the colonial government forced black people to pay tax in money for land, huts, and their live stock, and even a dog tax. In Namibia in the early 1920's Jan Smuts' soldiers massacred black people for resisting dog tax.

[14] Physically able males were hired on contract bases from the homelands to work in the mines. The contract duration varied between 18 to 24 months.

[15] I never had time to grow with my father around as he was a migrant labourer for the past 29 years and only met him when I was about 25 years old.

been ruling it until today"(Motshekga 2001: 2). Europeans saw themselves as superior beings and elevated themselves through what they regarded as the status of Christians and civilised nations, while looking upon Africans as heathen, as primitive and uncivilised people. With these stereotypical perceptions and assumptions, the whites considered the indigenous African people to be inferior, uncivilised and outside the Christian community, therefore deserving either co-ercion into Christianity, or extinction. The Euro-American racial and cultural ascendancy saw the dominated groupings as worthy of education and salvation hence many saw it as a white man's burden to care for these benighted brethren and to teach them Christianity, democracy and Western civilisation. Colonial governments and their church authorities thought it was best for children of the colonised to be taken away from their families and cultural milieu so that they could develop 'white' ways of life without the hindrance of their families: and meaning that they would be taught both to work and to be good Christians. Boarding schools in South Africa were seen as a practical necessity if not the harsh physical environment which caused many deaths, as was the case in Canada and Australia and some other parts of the world.[16]

In most of these mission schools in South Africa black students were prohibited from speaking indigenous languages. This was done consciously for the purpose of estranging the black children from their cultural upbringing.[17] According to Crais

> peasants [were forced to] learn that through their religious and their daily duties [for the white master] they would receive the love of God; that despite the inequality and pain of the present, there was an equality of all legitimate worldly callings which promised deliverance in the future (1992: 82).

Christianity, Western values and traditional practices were in stark opposition with African values, religious and cultural practices. For the Western culture and its value systems to survive, African values and belief systems had to be destroyed.

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[16] The Lovedale college in Alice, Ciskei, St Johns college and St James in Transkei, and the Rorkes Drift in Kwazulu Natal are just some of the many missionary schools established in South Africa

[17] Mission schools proliferated and the famous Lovedale college in Alice, the St Johns College in Transkei, Rorkesdrift in Kwazulu Natal etc. are good examples of such missionary institutions. In his book *Moving the Centre: the struggle for cultural freedoms*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo speaks of the humilation black students suffered in relation to use of indigenous languages at schools in colonial Kenya (1993:31-32-33)

To safeguard white domination, the colonial conquest was followed by an application of spiritual and cultural murder over Africans through missionary indoctrination. Christianity became the ideological vanguard of white racist ideology and contributed to the destruction of many African cultural practices and traditions. To paraphrase Biko, in its ascendancy in South Africa Christianity was made to look supreme and assumed the central point of a culture that brought with it, new styles of clothing, new customs, new forms of etiquette, new medical approaches, alien cultural values and new armaments.[18] The people among whom Christianity was spread had to cast away their indigenous clothing, their customs, their beliefs, which were all described as paganism. The colonial administrators were quick to resort to violent means to suppress resistance to domination and exploitation while various Christian education systems played a crucial role in developing receptive tendencies for a semi-European way of life through missionary control of education.[19] Soon after defeating the Africans, steeped in white supremacist ideology, Europeans denounced African cultures as barbaric and paganistic, hence deserving of destruction.

Ulwaluko, like many like many other African cultural practices was forbidden to all converts and those who were attending Western missionary schools. Due to this suppression of political and cultural expression, African people found themselves stripped of the core of their beings and became more estranged from each other. According to Biko,

> the acceptance of the colonialist-tainted version of Christianity marked the turning point in the resistance of African people. Soon after colonisation and their acceptance of Christianity black people were divided into two rival groups- amagqobhoka and amaqaba. The difference in clothing between these two groups made what otherwise could have been merely a religious difference actually become at times internecine warfare (1978: 56).

As the African church and missionary school attendees were known as *amagqobhoka* the non-church and non-school goers became to be known as the *amaqaba.*[20]

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[18] Steve Biko in *I write what I like* 1978, see selected bibliography.

[19] During the time of colonialism there was a range of Christian education all administered by Europeans such as the Roman Catholic church, Moraivan church and the Lutherian church, etc.

[20] *Amaqaba* refers to uneducated and non-church goers, while *amagqobhoka* refer to the educated and converted. The history of these terms can be seen as influencing each other. It is difficult to pin down which one came first. However, the term *amaqaba* took on negative connotations rooted in European erceptions of the "uncivilised natives" with no education. While *amagqobhoka* it is often perceived as referring to those who are civilised and educated.

Because of these differences the African people were converted into a playground for the colonisers as they pitted brother against brother, father against son and mother against daughter. Africans were violently forced to be passive recipients of European norms, their cultural values, and a world view which was not only directed at changing their belief system but to white-wash them of their African identity, to make them European copycats. This devastating history of colonialism finds its full expression in many other parts of the world where it took extreme forms of social injustice as recently as the twentieth century. In Australia Aboriginal children were severed from their parents and given to white families, due to state policy, a painful experience only recently being acknowledged and confronted by the country. In Canada the same happened through the Western formal boarding school system whereby children of the American Indian population were permanently separated from their families.[21] In the USA a sustained extermination and displacement of the indigenous population of the land took place.

In the Eastern Cape sacred Xhosa cultural practices such as *ulwaluko,* were heavily criticized and its abolition highly recommended. Among those who attended missionary schools, efforts were made to ban the initiation of boys. However, the least the authorities managed to do was to destroy some aspects of the initiation ritual like *umtshilo* (the initiate's dance). Gitywa notes with regret that in 1863 at Burnshill in the Ciskei "its pursuit by [the] converted and the educated was critically written against by one Xhosa [convert] on the pages of Indaba" (1976: 355). Tiyo Soga who while a teacher and a "mission father" at the Clarkebury Mission school in Engcobo, reported ten *abakhwetha*[22] roaming the mission grounds to Brownlee, then magistrate in King Williams Town, who arrested and imprisoned them for two weeks. Soga's story reflects the fact that the Europeans' mission triumphed through the help and blessings from some African collaborators who felt in some ways defeated even before the battle was over.

Faced by this white aggressive domination the Xhosa people had to constantly revise and negotiate their cultural practices and identities as they struggled to resist Euro-

[21] See Michael Kenny's, "A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective Memory" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1999. p.429.
[22] *Abakhwetha* is a plural name given to Xhosa initiates

Western domination and servitude and to maintain their customs and cultural traditions. Lumka Funani states that in Lovedale, a missionary institution in the Eastern Cape, "circumcision was generally regarded as a great unforgivable sin deserving expulsion"(1990:V). However, this proved not to be compelling enough to bar the Xhosa from undergoing *ulwaluko*. For example, while studying at Lovedale mission school, the renowned Xhosa poet and writer S.E.K. Mqhayi is said to have secretly stolen away from school to be circumcised with fellow students.
Although he was pardoned and readmitted this was regarded as transgression of the rules imposed on Xhosa people by the white establishment.

In the contemporary South African context black people find themselves virtually uprooted from their traditional African anchorage and are not really adequately transplanted or anchored in the "new" turbulent Euro-Western capitalist-controlled world. Their heritage and ethos has not only been altered and defaced but they have also been psychologically and physically disfigured. I accept the fact that people evolve and so does their culture, owing to the ever-changing environment and different social encounters. But our case is totally different as we have been transfixed and transformed to a point where we are not even sure of ourselves. We have been taught and forced to deny our reality as we hurriedly (sometimes forced and sometimes voluntarily), try to fit into some else's worldview. This is not surprising, as this overt manifestation of the residue that colonialism and apartheid left as the legacy of Euro-Western imperialism, now parades our streets in new disguises, in terms such as 'internationalism', 'globalism' and other fashionable post-colonial terms. This is a situation characteristic of many third world societies, albeit South Africa with her ironic status as both a first and a third world presents particular disjunctures.

As Western social values and cultural practices takes their toll, it is not suprising, to find many black families in our contemporary society practising contradictory cultural rituals, comprising both Western and African aspects. Families are experiencing great strain as the authority and respect which they used to enjoy under the umbrella of traditional morals, values and customs are being challenged by the new generation, because of the impact of Western orientated technological and cultural developments.

This generation, instead of showing a productive synthesis of Western and African values show signs of conflicting diversity and loss of structures. The speed of casting off African values and norms is greater than the time needed for a positive translation of wearing the Western capitalist values, premised on individualism, without loss of ethos and traditional values. Hence, in our time one finds families practicing both Christian and indigenous rituals such as church baptism and *imbeleko.*[23] They seem to inhabit two worlds that constantly show conflicting identities. Gitywa says that,

> as far as contemporary youth is concerned, tribal identity is fading away since other identities are making claims on them [African children]; it is not uncommon to find, as Mbiti observed that, "within one family or household may be found two totally different worlds co-existing: the children may be attending university studies, while parents are illiterate and concerned mainly with cultivating their fields. In such a family, there are two sets of expectations, economic standards, cultural concerns and worldview (1976:138).

The Euro-American cultural imperialism which finds its roots in the concepts of 'modernity was, and still is, the ideology behind the imperialism and colonialism which expresses the West's conviction that all cultures will ultimately be united, because they will be all Westernized. This 'white-washing' of African minds was designed to elicit confusion, and still does among African people. It perpetuates their social and cultural disintegration and coaxes them to be perpetual students and passive consumers of Western values and European culture. Black African people are uprooted and not firmly anchored within the 'new' Western culture. Their social stability then remains at risk. Hence the great need for Afrocentricism as an agency for the understanding of world phenomena and hopefully as means to disrupt and destroy the master narrative on which the Western hegemony is based. By this I mean the need for black artists to affirm and embrace their African origins whilst at the same time affirming a broader and open identity that includes a place within the contemporary and international world. I don't want to argue that one should " be enclosed within a particular culture" (see p 61).

[23] *Imbeleko* ritual is performed to introduce a Xhosa child to the family ancestors and for their protection, which is similar to the Christian baptism.

5. THE BLACK BODY IN ART AND *ULWALUKO*

Introductory note

The debates around the politics of representation reflect the unresolved tensions and conflicts that underpin artistic practice in South African visual arts. In this field there exists a concern amongst a number of artists to ensure respect for individual identities, to seek through their works conditions permitting collective ways of life to flourish. The latter concern is not merely a matter of recognition, but extends further as it demands that one should be able to name oneself and be confirmed by others as that. It is through the embodied memories and cultural practices that are articulated in relation to traditions, economic, political and social institutions, that these visual representations can be fully expressed.

My own experience as a young (black) artist operating in a dominantly white context continues to reflect not only marginalisation but also subordination and the constant struggle to comprehend my black body: that is, the self and the embodiment of the self. It is this subordinated and marginalised experience that I wish to keep questioning and negotiating through the means and presence of my black body. Therefore my study of *ulwaluko* is a journey and a manifestation dealing with and confronting the use of the black body and its position in a South African art arena dominated by whites. That is, to locate the use and experience of the black body within contemporary art discourse and the ritual of *ulwaluko*, where debates of the body include issues of politics, identity, race, gender, age, and class etc. Thus this discussion, centred on the black body, demands some theory of how the body is defined, how its psychophysical entity is socialised, and thereby how it is at risk or has the positive potential of being dis-empowered or empowered as a cultural (f)actor.

In order to discuss these issues, as a visual artist and to understand them better, I felt it is necessary to explore some of the implications and visual interpretations made by a number of contemporary South African artists caught in the current predicament of representation of indigenous ritual practices. Hence, in the course of this chapter some references to the work of certain artists will be made to illustrate my argument. It should be also understood that the comments made are not premeditated negative criticisms of particular artists and their work. Rather, these examples are given for the

purpose of stimulating debate and the desire to highlight the moral tension and conflicts in the imaging of 'others' by 'other others', without perhaps according these subjects the respect they deserve. This can be attributed to many reasons but the more poignant one is too often the lack of self-criticism, the arrogance, and un-awareness of the level of ignorance of the artists in question. At this particular moment in our history nothing could be more perilous towards progress in this debate than the suppression of informed criticism. In our struggle towards a genuinely democratic future we must be prepared to subject our intentions to engaged critique, followed by open and intrepid discussion. This is one intention behind my work: through an interpretative visual medium of painting where I explore, within the context of my own experience, the issues that arise in the practice and representation of *ulwaluko,* I wish to generate a courageous, and inclusive debate.

The black body and its (mis)representation in contemporary South African art

When discussing body politics Diana Angaitis says that,

> the body is a highly contested site - its flesh is both the recipient and the source of desire, lust and hatred. As a pawn of technology [in a capitalist society], it is sacred and sacrificial, bearing the politics of society and state. The body is our common bond, yet it separates us in its public display of identity, race and gender (Ewing 1994: 324).

I concur with Angaitis that "the body is our common bond", yet it also expresses, in the way in which it is manifested in public space, many diversities of group, age, class, language and era. The body is a rich and interesting object of social and political theory upon which individuals, clans, ethnic, and societal values are inscribed to enhance some ideological needs. The framework within which the body is situated is historical, scientific, and cultural.

In the arena of contemporary art the human body has been in the centre of debates as it "is being rethought and reconsidered by artists and writers because it is being restructured and reconstituted by scientists and engineers" (Ewing 1994: 9). There are many reasons for this and may involve, among others, the development and interaction of several fields of thought such as anthropology, ethnography, medicine, cultural studies, art etc. Some of these disciplines are understood to be an enmeshed part of the colonial project. The apartheid system in South Africa is an extension of

colonialism, accountable to date for the ways in which the black body is positioned in our contemporary society. The black body has for a long time represented the abnormal in many Eurocentric discourses, particularly in the arts. In the South African context Manganyi states that "in its ascendancy in South Africa, apartheid and earlier historical variants became the ideology of racial difference, the mystical veil which obscured the relation of domination and exploitation and became the hallmark of social interaction"(1991: 1). From Manganyi's statement it is clear that the black body has been made to occupy a subordinated position to the white body which has assumed the superordinator's position. Black and 'blackness' have and still have ever changing constructed boundaries: pliable, makeshift mouldings, always in the process of invention to suit Eurocentric 'truths' such as that of 'darkest Africa'. The black body has been constructed as available, deviant and degraded as can be observed in many Eurocentric visual materials and literature produced by and for the white gaze.

As witnessed in the writings of critics in South African contemporary art discourse and artistic practice, the *use* of this black body has become highly contested. For example Cape Town artist Berni Searle's work is a pertinent example. It questions and challenges the use of the black body as a space where whiteness has been and still can be defined as the legitimate agent, through which black stories can be articulated while blacks are denied a subject position. Speaking about her work Searle states that

> placing myself or my body in the work exposes other aspects of my identity, for example gender. Exposing myself therefore involves a process of claiming and points to [the] idea [that] there are a range of axes that inform identity which are interconnected, determining relationships of dependency and domination in any given context.[24]

The provocative manner by which white artists have used the black body as subject for their work have elicited heated debates among contemporary critics including many artists. The dominant subject positions of whites and their values deserve to be constantly interrogated. This is partly because it seems to be that the white practitioner is "unblinkingly intent on representing black subjectivity at the margins of cultural and aesthetic discourse" (Enwezor 1997:25).

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[24] Returning the Gaze: Cape Town One City Festival: Nka, journal of contemporary African art. Number 13/14, Spring, summer 2001

Some of these arguments, provoked by Enwezor's article *Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation* are clearly reflected in essays contained in the book: *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity, and Politics in Contemporary South African Art,* edited by Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz. Olu Oguibe takes up this debate further in a 1997 exhibition catalogue, *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary African Women Artists,* edited by Salah Hassan when he accuses female artists of Caucasian descent of using "the bodies of Black women...without consent or sensitivity, and fed [them] into various, deterministic, and very problematic discourse[s] of gender politics in a discriminate manner that is not evident in the representation of women of Caucasian descent" (1997: 69).

For the individual the problem of the body is both personal and social, hence questions of power, authorship, and representation remain critical. Therefore, in a racially supremacist society like our "new" South Africa, in which the black body has been used as a medium for the development of racist symbol-systems and fantasies, there is a great need for the interrogation of the ways in which the black body is represented. The use of the black body and other related African cultural practices as subject matter by some white art practitioners (and sometimes blacks too), within the present historical moment, warrants scrutiny. I must mention that it frustrates to observe sensitive issues related to blackness and whiteness and racism being avoided or ignored while we talk about nation-building and other uncontentious subjects: that is, we need to bring the subject of the black body and person into a central focus of debate. I believe debates of this nature, and the contradictions associated with these debates, need be constantly positioned in a primary place in our scholarly endeavour.

Art and otherness

Now in the aftermath of the Western imperialist, colonialist and apartheid eras in South Africa, despite their contribution to world culture I feel that black Africans are still denied a major place in Western artistic discourse. In theories that are loaded with ideological Western assumptions about Africans' art works from this continent, they were and often still are reduced to mere curio objects or artefacts. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries black Africans working as contemporary artists have produced artworks that resist this reductive description. The works of artists such as,

Ernest Mancoba, Sydney Khumalo, Lucky Sibiya, Dumile Feni and many others are good examples.[25]

Nevertheless new forms and theories of denial are advanced with Western scholars implying a belief and perceptions of Africans as being incapable of producing complex artworks. Thus, it was, or appeared to be, inconceivable to the dominant Western cultures that African people can produce sophisticated and complex works other than mimicking works and styles of the artists of Western descent. There are indeed black artists whose works are recognised in the international arena as sophisticated and complex such as the works of Rasheed Araeen. Eddie Chambers, Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare Adrian Piper, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Willie Bester etc. However, their relationship to and terms of gaining this acknowledgement is a complex and problematic issue and beyond the scope of this research as it warrants more elaboration. Olu Oguibe in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Market Place* illustrates this complicated issue when he argues that "the confines of perception, with which African artists are either constructed or called upon to construct themselves...speaks to a discourse of power and confinement in current Western appreciation of modern African art; a discourse of speech and regulation of utterance, which by denying African artist the right language and self articulation, incarcerates them in the policed colonies of Western desire"(1999:19). While Eddie Chambers notes that [in England] "what's happened, is that the [white] art world is now saying, 'We'll "acknowledge' them by patronising and interacting with a few of their artists'. He further argues the problem: "I don't think that the process of patronising half a dozen artists is adequate, because it means that there are several hundred artists left to wither"(1999:26).

Regardless of this magnificent silence on the historical and cultural achievements of black Africans in Western discourses, in South Africa as in other parts of the continent, art-making and appreciation have been and continue to be in abundant existence. Be it for communal and social use or for individual, there has been a long tradition of art-making in this country and throughout the continent, from the Ancient

[25] For example the work of Lucky Sibiya is always loosely referred to as influenced by Cecil Skotnes not vice versa. This is attributed to the fact that Skotnes was Sibiya's teacher at the Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg. However, it is a fact that when two cultures meet they influence each other.

Egyptian civilisation in the north of Africa to the rock paintings of the San people of the South and the Diaspora world. In this country the Lydenberg terracotta heads from Mafikeng and the gold rhino, amongst other objects, excavated at Mapungubwe[26] are a living example to such claims. Another example is the works of contemporary practising artists such as, Sandile Zulu, Moshekwa Langa, David Koloane, Kay Hassan to mention but few.

Since the time of discoveries in the 1400s, European travellers have been in search of the marvellous and the unknown. During these travels, particularly in the third world, it has been a tradition for many white people to see black people as *subjects or objects.* The issue of representation has a long history dating as far back as the story of Western domination of Third World inhabitants and their cultures. The nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented 'anthropological displays' in the West. At first the exhibitions of colonised people were popularised mainly to advertise the untapped wealth of the colonies. During the second half of the nineteenth century the orientation and purpose changed as these popular exhibitions gained the imprimatur of contemporary racial theories. Displays of colonised people were used to justify the exploitative practices in the colonies and further invasion of "unconquered territories in Africa", and other parts of the world (Maxwell 1999:1). An actual South African body was widely represented when the famous "Hottentot Venus"[27] was exhibited in Britain and later in France, where she eventually died with a broken heart. A Frenchman dissected her body; a naturalist named Curvier, in the name of science. Up to date her remains are housed in one of the French museums and forms part of their permanent collection. In such exhibitions Maxwell notes, the Europeans " exploited [the] time-worn myths about practices such as cannibalism and prostitution, through which the colonised were portrayed as flouting the taboos associated with civilisation"(1999: 2).

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[26] The Lydenerg terracotta heads discovered in 1960 are now housed in the South African Museum. *Masuku: Golden Links with our Past:* September 2000 – January 2001. This exhibition displayed approximately 150 objects from three archaeological sites discovered in 1930 in South Africa.

[27] Saartjie Baartman was born in the Eastern Cape in the late 1800s and was taken to England by a British naval doctor. She was first exhibited publically as a curiosity in London and later in France where she died in 1815 and was dissected in the name of science. Her genitalia and brains were preserved in formalin and her remains exhibited in the Musee de I'Homme where they remain part of the permanent collection to date.

Through the emphasis of these popular anthropological displays the European masses were exposed to the spectacle of racial difference whose primary intention was to make them feel, physically, psychologically, mentally and morally superior to the colonised people. As a result of these practices and the scientific theories on race, colonised people were relegated to the fringes of history and to the domain of objects, which denied their subjectivity.

As early as the eighteenth century through to the present, the co-option of non-Western culture into the 'art world' has been achieved by the appropriation of traditional ritual practices and material objects, incorporating them into Western mainstream art. This has consisted and still does to a certain extent, of the transposition of the experience of the rituals of 'third world' cultures dominantly mediated, manipulated, distorted and exploited by artists, white in particular, as cultural resources within the context of mainstream art and its institutions. In a complex society such as South Africa that is deeply divided by racial categories it is difficult to speak of a cohesive visual culture. Gavin Younge illustrates this when he says,

> Without having passed through the purifying process of a revolution, and with new battle lines drawn in fertile racial grounds, it remains too early to talk of a 'South African art'. To do so would invoke too many elisions and approximations. It will also invoke values and qualities determined by a Eurocentric past (2000/1: 38).

The individual and the collective

In order to understand my position and the sensitivity of the subject I am researching, it should be noted that my position as researcher and also as an 'insider' is as complicated as that of those who are 'outsiders'. I have experienced many difficulties during this research. It also is not an absolute condition: there are many degrees of distinction and relativity in one's position or positioning. McEvilley when discussing the relationship between self and other postulates that,

> the self is created by its apprehension of the other and the other is created by its distinction as self. The self cannot be itself unless it stands against what is not-self. They create each other and sustain each other's existence. Not-self is needed to make the self (1992:147).

This implies that there is no 'self' without the 'other'. In a multicultural society such as South Africa, blacks and whites interact and are constantly influencing each other

culturally, yet white values and norms are dominant and Western-orientated. However positive one may sound in articulating the novelty of the so-called *new* South Africa, it is necessary that we constantly remind ourselves that we are products of colonialism, missionary indoctrination, apartheid and its later variants. Like other post-colonial countries around the world South African society, as divided as it is (the geography of apartheid still exists in spatial separation of race and economic groups), faces the problems of forging new identities that strive towards decolonisation and an unlearning of old patterns of superiority and inferiority. This process must include recognition, respect, and accommodation of the previously dominated cultural practices of the black people.

Here I refer to both the writing and imaging of cultural practices such as *ulwaluko* in South Africa. In addition to some of the problems faced by such rituals the position of power and insensitivity of those who by 'goodwill' intend to subjectify this Xhosa ritual in their works deserves enquiry. I hope and believe that the *apartheid myth* of separateness (by which blacks were relegated to a life of inferiority and whites legislatively entrenched in superior positions), and the boundaries based on differences of skin colour, physical appearance and so forth, may disappear. Nonetheless the ideologies which feed and sustain these boundaries of difference and which form the fundamental basis of their creation, are being imaginatively reconstructed and reconstituted. They are brought back through certain aspects of cultural expression and production, echoing a process described by Said as using the "surplus resources of their enduring myths as banners to rally adherents"(1992: 1087).

In the arena of contemporary South African visual art, images and artistic expressions that represent black cultural practices, created by both black and white artists, (but more often so by white artists), have disturbed and distressed black people. This is a problem that has been debated vigorously over recent years up to the present, as was observed in the exhibition of Steve Hilton-Barber's photographs of the *Sotho* initiation ceremony that stirred controversy in 1990 in Johannesburg. This exhibition raised issues of insensitivity and intrusion in that Hilton-Barber as a white person invaded and exposed a private and a sacred Sotho cultural practice. The remarks in the commentary book for this exhibition bear witness to how black people spelt out their anger. The generally expressed objection against Hilton-Barber's representation

of the ritual practice was that it was morally unacceptable for him especially as an *outsider* to photograph aspects of the ritual practise and to exhibit them for financial gains in a public venue. Referring to this exhibition in *Staffrider* O'Neill asked this pertinent question, "would the author so easily flaunt the much more powerful white society, would he not be scared to put on display photographs showing the genitals of white children if he hadn't first extensively consulted with their parents and his lawyers"? (1990: 10).

Five years late, in 1996 another exhibition by a white artist provoked a heated debate when Pippa Skotnes exhibited black bodies at the South African National gallery (discussed below). According to Clive Kellner,

> post-apartheid South African art is fraught with attitudes of political correctness, which has led to a debate in which race is the formative principle and priority issue for most cultural production, by black and white alike... such framing imposes a hierarchy, in which the white manufacturer of cultural meaning is always in the privileged position above that of the black subject. This is further problematised by the persistent use of the black subject by the white artist in portraying South African society, a form of revisionist colonialism (1997: 30).

On the surface the widespread white repudiation of the past is admirable but what undercuts the rhetoric are the glaring realities that white people generally are still enjoying the privileges they acquired through the exploitative systems of the past. It is evident that they are dominating most of the privileged areas such as research institutes and universities, and are still controlling the economy of the country. The same can be said of artistic production and its politics where whites are still at the top of the pyramid as they dominate most of the artistic fields of production and the power that informs and swings the pendulum. Although the weight has shifted there is still an imbalance.

As Okwui Enwezor argues, in South Africa the representational terrain is "still dominated by highly literate, but nonetheless unflexive white cultural practitioners unblinkingly intent on representing black subjectivity at the margins of cultural and aesthetic discourse" (1997: 25). It seems that many white artists are intrigued if not obsessed with the idea of representing and speaking for or on behalf of the black people. There is an implication that black people cannot negotiate their own history. It

can thus be argued that there is an element of opportunism or patronage that allow whites to speak for or on behalf of the dominated groupings. Problematic and widely debated is the exhibition of the marginalised 'Bushman' people, *Miscast: negotiating Khoisan identity,* curated by Pippa Skotnes.[28] According to Enwezor, the curator's aim in this exhibition was to reveal the brutality of colonialism that destroyed the '*Khoisan'* people, deconstructing their identity and leading to a position today where they are struggling to regain their sense of being in all human spheres. Such argument can be understood on one level but on the other hand it is difficult not to assess critically her initiative as representing a perpetuation of dominance of the whites in speaking for the marginalised 'other'.

The Hurikamma Cultural Movement's comments on Skotnes' exhibition are interesting to consider. They point to the representation of Khoisan bodies and their exposure "to curious glances of rich whites in search of dinner table conversation".[29] This highlights the problem that in the portrayal of blacks as subjects as well as objects in art, they are still subjected to the dominant white gaze whose interest and involvement are seen as problematical by many critics and observers. These thoughts occur because our past has taught us that racial whiteness has been associated with power, exploitation and the overall domination of the black people. What was questioned was the lack of participation of the living subjects. Enwezor's critique on the exhibition holds responsible Skotnes for assigning herself "the role of historian, perhaps even custodian of 'Bushman' history, so much so that not one African was invited in the catalogue of more than 15 white contributors to comment on a history in which Africans themselves are implicated" (1997:21).

The constant use of black people as subjects by white artists provokes laughter and some degree of embarrassment. When I accompanied Professor Gavin Younge (as both a guide and interpreter) in 1999 to the 'township' of Langa in the Western Cape, I had mixed feelings about his mission. To my surprise he bought bags of African medicine for cleansing the body, called *maphipha,* which he intended to use for his art

[28] *Miscast: negotiating Khoisan identity, 1996,* South African National Gallery.
[29] Hurikamma Culktural Movement, *Enough is enough,* 14 April, 1996. SANG Archive.

project, though he had no idea at the time what it was [30]. As a visual artist myself, I do believe that appropriation is a vital component of artistic creativity and expression. However, what intrigues me is the fascination white artists have toward the use of blacks and their cultural practices as subjects and objects in their work. I was left puzzled and without understanding Younge's intention or the fascination of many others. I found myself inclined to ask them why they always find it easy to appropriate aspects of black African cultural practices in their work? In one way or the other such representations are problematic as they reflect the persistence of white domination and appropriation of black cultural practices without due respect, sensitivity and recognition of the deeper meanings these symbolic materials, objects and images have for those who believe in them. I concur with Peter Jackson when he notes that,

> contemporary racism is not simply an historical remnant of colonial stereotypes but *an active creation that varies with present circumstances...* there is nonetheless an important sense in which contemporary racist ideologies employ a pre-formed vocabulary, adopting and adapting an already available language - a repertoire of racist images and stereotypes that are drawn on selectively as occasion demands (1989: 133).

White on black representation

Beezy Bailey's appropriation of Louis Botha's sculpture in front of the parliament building to represent a Xhosa initiate has been loosely described as a work of a creative genius. The work could be interpreted as new South Africa being like an initiate coming of age, fragile and in a liminal stage. The country is in a transitional stage, neither here nor there as it is undergoing the "rites of passage", like Xhosa boys during initiation into manhood. Such is a generous and imaginative analogy. However a more thoughtful and critical reading of this work yields unsettling revelations. Why do so many white artists find it easy to use black subjects as objects or vehicles with which to ascend the minds and feelings of their fellow South Africans? Is Bailey provoking the 'conservative white' South African society that holds in esteem icons of their heroes such as the Botha statue? If so, why the use of a Xhosa initiate as the object by which to assault his white audience? Why not a Jewish, Afrikaner or English initiate?

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[30] Gavin Younge's *Workmen's Compensation II* consisted of ten wheelbarrows, with contents ranging from shackland ornaments, baboon skulls, strips of tree bark and dompas or passbooks bought from black people, was exhibited in Paris, *Champs de la Sculpture 2000.*

It can be argued that Bailey's piece like that of his contemporaries, Peet Pienaar, Minnette Vari, to mention a few, reflects his residual apartheid conditioning, although he scarcely has a pretext to excuse what I view as the unreformed bias of this work. Viewed from another perspective one finds it interesting enough that Bailey's piece was executed not long after Thabo Mbeki, a Xhosa, took office as a new president. Can we see this handling of the Botha statue as mere coincidence or as a calculated analogy for Mbeki as a Xhosa initiate entering a sacred space (parliament), that has for centuries been reserved and run by whites with the exclusion of the black people, as a means for deciding the future of all South Africans? The caption that came as its title reads *Abakhwetha.* In the Cape Times, local newspaper, the caption reads "RIDING HIGH: Louis Botha's statue outside the parliament was "made over' by local artist Beezy Bailey yesterday".[31] The farmer and warrior statesman became an *abakhwetha* initiate to symbolise South Africa's 'coming of age'. This title alone provides a clue to the unimportance of the subject portrayed to the artist. This is incorrect language usage (as the singular Xhosa word for an initiate is ***umkhwetha***), and suggests that this artist's approach may well lack critical rigour. In whatever way one chose to view it, I found this art intervention to be problematic, and it continues to reverberate in my mind with racial undertones. Re-locating this theme of a private ritual into a public context is trivialising and indicates a degree of disrespect towards Xhosa people and their culture.

Sometimes it appears that the commodification of the black body and culture, through the use of the black subject within art produced for the bourgeois and tourist markets both here and abroad, produce superstars in the art world and bring fame and material rewards. The point here is not about who uses which subject for whom but rather, "how in our present circumstances are the polarities of apartheid such as black/white, centre/periphery, modern/traditional etc. going to be reconstructed" (Araeen, 1995: 17). These issues when tackled within the field of the fine arts and within a public context are sometimes complicated further rather than resolved. In Peet Pienaar's latest attempt to opportunise and use this Xhosa ritual as his subject matter in a sensationalised manner, many conflicts and tensions were roused. Pienaar's

[31] Cape Times, 23/09/1999

performance proposal for the *Ubudoda: Images of Masculinity* show, to be circumcised by a black female doctor at the AVA gallery, raised concern culminating in a public debate.[32] When black people raise their concern they are often branded as separatists and accused of, to use Sue Williamson's charge, "cultural apartheid". The implications of these representations raise serious questions regarding the use of the black subject by such artists without respect for those who practise traditional rituals. The arrogance that Pienaar showed when his motives were questioned in a public debate, without being able to give convincing answers, illustrated a lack of self criticism, and an unawareness of the implications of appropriating the ritual of another culture, within the social and contemporary context of a country traumatised by a history of entrenched racism.

Black on black representation

This use of black subjects does not implicate white artists only but black as well. Peter Magubane's photographs of Sotho and Xhosa initiations need consideration in this regard. These works evoke some concern when it is seen that Magubane is Zulu and the subject of his work involves Xhosa initiation rituals. I am not advocating ethnicity here, however, according to the rules governing the Sotho and Xhosa male initiation rituals, although the artist is black his 'blackness' does not allow him the same access as the insiders (Sotho and Xhosa people). His blackness has some degree of *otherness,* as far as the rules of the ritual are concerned. It is critical then to understand that his blackness has limitations: it does not licence him as an insider and he is restricted as he is neither Sotho nor Xhosa, and nor has he undergone the ritual. In this case he is as excluded as the other 'others'. Hence it can be argued that he is, in this instance, the 'other'. I cannot help but find such intrusion showing disrespect and presumption which further complicates and exacerbates the problems into which these rituals are locked. Other concerns are those of motive, application and outcomes, in this case the public and commercial context in which these images are represented. Magubane's aestheticising photographs of the Xhosa initiation in his books *Vanishing Cultures in South Africa: changing customs in a changing world* and the *African Renaissance,* call for critical analysis.

[32] *Politics of Art: Race and Censorship*; a debate held at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis

There is another aspect to consider. While I find Magubane's glossy pictures aesthetically pleasing, they are also shocking. They are deeply problematic, especially when one considers where and how these art products are consumed in the market both locally and internationally. I cannot help but see them as intended primarily for the tourist market, as a commodification and a prostitution of the culture of others, and subsequent devaluation of that culture. Most of the sitters are not named and acknowledged. Like the old colonial stereotypical 'othering' of third world inhabitants they are ensnared by Magubane's camera in an over-determined identity. They remain exotic and are locked in an unchanging world of their own, not influenced by contemporary developments. In addition to this, to make motives more suspect, only the articles of white writers accompany his pictures. This indicates that there was little or no consultation with or participation of the subjects in the final market product. Although there might be many ways of viewing these images. It is arguable that, like some white artists who represent the black subject primarily for a white and affluent audience, some black artists trained mainly in Western institutions, also consciously or unconsciously commodify black people and their cultural practices.

Ulwaluko and the black body

For me, as far as my research is concerned an inquiry directed at the subject of the black body has entailed a close consideration of how the body is not only used as an agent, but also as an 'object' itself in the construction of masculine identity in Xhosa society. There can be no *ulwaluko* ritual without the presence of the black body: hence, the black body is central to this ritual practice. This is so because the ritual acts as a metaphor, or it becomes a metaphor for a process of socialisation, which reflects the transformation of the physical body into a symbol of culture. The body therefore becomes a social construct. Thus a special appeal is often made to the ritual to model the process of socialisation as the transformation of the body into culture. In the context of *ulwaluko* among the Xhosa people the black body is used as a social canvas on which it maps out its values, identity and beliefs, including the designation of status, class, sex, role and responsibility. This black body is used as a medium for the internalisation and the reproduction of the person, both as an individual and a social

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School of Fine Art lecture theatre in which the writer was one of the panelists, in 2000.

being, into a unity, a simultaneous constitution of both the self and the world of social relations. Bourdieu states that,

> it is in the dialectical relationship between the body and a space structured according to mythico-ritual opposition, that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the embodying of structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus to appropriate the world (Bell C.1992: 98).

Thus it can be construed that through *ulwaluko* the initiates by means of ritual performances are "indoctrinated' to become responsible social beings and are reconstructed as that. This ritualisation is a strategic social activity and socialisation in which the body is always the agent. The ritualised body is produced through the interaction of the body with a structured and structuring environment. One of the several dimensions of the ritual, among the Xhosa people, particular to the ritual of *ulwaluko,* is that every boy is obliged to undergo it in order to graduate to manhood. The ritual practice of *ulwaluko* is marked by a series of ceremonies authenticated by the cutting of the foreskin. This is the longest and most complex ritual practice that a Xhosa boy has to undergo in order to graduate into becoming a marriageable and moral social adult. Driver indicates that "one function of ritual is to mark pathways for morality to follow" (1991: 93). *Ulwaluko* is multi-functional or multi-faceted: it acts on the level of the individual, the social group and the supernatural. Thus it facilitates personal, social and supernatural relationships. Traditionally *ulwaluko* was performed with the hope that the initiate will improve his behaviour, moral values and his sense of responsibility towards his society. To what extent is this effective in our contemporary society? This is a troubled question. Nevertheless there is a strong adherence to initiation and its intentions and principles. Most of the answers elicited from the interviews I made could not go further than, saying in Tshangane's words, "*lisiko elidala lamaXhosa"* (it is an age-old Xhosa custom/tradition). "If one is a Xhosa he has to undergo it. It is our culture and we have to preserve it in every way possible"[33].

Contemporary culture with its Euro-American impositions and influences offers no breathing space for African people and their ritual practices such as that of *ulwaluko.* As Thembinkosi Goniwe asks "what would one expect in a concrete jungle where

[33] interview with Tshangane, July 1999: Engcobo.

politics of the day are centred on issues of economic and technological advancement? We are facing [a] serious crisis here. While infections and death of *abakhwetha* [initiates] escalate, the conflict between 'traditional' and 'non-traditionalists' becomes irreconcilable". The availability of appropriate space in urban areas whereby the ritual can be performed away from public scrutiny is a primary necessity and the fulfilment and success of *ulwaluko* is dependent in part on this factor. However there is a severe lack of such space within our overcrowded urban environments. To be specific, I must add that the infections and death of *abakhwetha,* and conflict between 'traditional' and 'non-traditionalists' are problems linked to poverty, urbanisation, fragmentation, and displacement of communities. The problems can be attributed largely to the contemporary Western culture, as Malidoma Patrice Some` states that "modern culture is a show-off culture that intimidates. It is generating so much death, loss, and displacement" (1993: 58-59).

This is apparent in that the Xhosa traditional and cultural practices with their meanings and significance are constantly being shifted and challenged by a modern culture premised on privileging the white body and its values. The spiritual poverty and frustration which black people are suffering from has become a breeding ground for disrespect to elders and to tradition and renders them unable to critically negotiate their problems other than lamenting the mess the white man has caused.

According to Hugh-freeland and Crain, "ritual [can be] usefully and relevantly theorised as a contested space, social action, and identity politics"(1998:4). Although this is not (yet) so in our South African context, it is an objective of my investigation, through my work, to renegotiate *ulwaluko* with the black body as the central vehicle and means of contesting space, social action, and identity politics. In *ulwaluko* this is done through a series of physical movements, ritual actions, spatial and temporal constructs. An environment is organised according to schemes of privileged opposition. These activities simultaneously work to impress these schemes upon the body of the participant or the initiate, as well as the viewer. The initiate's body is always conditioned by and responsive to a specific context. Examples of rituals centred on the body ranging from marking and painting of the body to rituals involving pain, confessional routines and control of the space. This renders the initiate's body as a medium of play and power, and thus the ritual works to forge a

specific social and political technology of the body. In this way the body becomes a cultural site on which the Xhosa society acts upon or contests, in their construction of the wider social body.

In a different light Manganyi when citing Fisher, says that the "body depersonalisation is actually encouraged by many of our current customs and fads... [the] body is simply one more standardised frame and, as such, seems perhaps to belong more to the culture than to [the] self" (1991: 41). It seems that it is from the realisation of this social 'standardised frame' of which Manganyi speaks that many initiates participate in the ritual as part of 'their culture' even though this is not expressed in an exact manner. However, both theoretically and practically this is rightly so, as from childhood we have a strong sense of how we are expected to look and how, in our fantasies, we would like to appear. Growing older, we become increasingly aware of accepted conventions of dress and behaviour, a complex code that signifies the unwritten laws, the permissions and taboos on which every society is based. Therefore it can be said that the body of the initiate becomes a field, or functions as a site in which to negotiate multiple meanings invested with personal and social realisation.

This practice is not very different to the making of meaning through art-making, such as the cycle of paintings I have completed that accompany this dissertation. Relatively, the body is like a canvas (in this case skins and blankets) on which paint is splattered and marks are made to create meaning. Ritual is a cultural practice and it can be argued that it parallels painting as a cultural practice in its own right. Also, during this research project, I have realised that my studio is a ritual space where I negotiate meaning, contest ideas and construct my identity as an individual and an artist. Like a ritual space, or *ibhuma* (the initiate's lodge), my studio has been a secluded space in which I perform the painting ritual. Hence I compare and see my art-making process as a ritual where I negotiate form and meaning, and express thoughts through action. The creative process parallels my experience when I (the black body) underwent *ulwaluko*, and echoes the current initiation I am undergoing entering into the academy within a system of Western education.

Through ritual performances thoughts are acted out, and thus it can be said that ritual is nothing more than the acting out of thoughts, beliefs and ideas which are simultaneously generated, experienced and affirmed as 'real' by individuals or communities. There are thus clear parallels with the creative and transformative process of art-making.

6. *ULWALUKO* IN CONTEXT

> The boy's body inherits physical abilities developed by long-dead ancestors, and his mind inherits spiritual and soul powers developed centuries ago.... The job of the initiator, whether the initiator is a man or a woman, is to prove to the boy or girl that he or she is more than flesh and blood. Don Pinnock, (1997:9)

Life is full of transitions from one stage, status or condition to another. In every society people are concerned with the resolutions of the various crises in the life cycle of individuals as they occur at such critical stages as birth, puberty; adoption into age or cult groups; promotion into association and enthronement and death. Traditional societies frequently marked and negotiated these transitional stages with collective rituals. These rituals continue to persist in our post-modern era, though in innovative and assorted forms. They still provide an important sense of spiritual, personal and social transformations. Malidoma Patrice Some` calls these rituals and ceremonies the "journeys of the spirit" as they enable people to rise above the mundane happening of everyday life and connect with higher powers or spirits.

Traditional cultures everywhere greeted the onset of puberty, especially in males, with elaborate ritual ceremonies. Initiation rituals or rites of passage has played a vital role in marking the progress of individuals and communities through life's inexorable cycle - from birth to death. Nowhere in the world has this been truer than in Africa. All over the continent thousands of men, women, and girls gather in every male initiation season to celebrate these rites. Male initiation is commonly practiced throughout the African continent: from Egypt in the north to the Poro secret society in West Africa, the Jola people of the Senegal and Ghambia, the Masai people of Kenya in the east, the Sotho, Tswane, Venda, and the Xhosa on the Southern tip of the continent.

Among the Xhosa as is the case in other societies, children are objects of rituals. Rituals mark their life and status from childhood until death. Although my interest lies in the values and transformation into contemporary life of traditional rituals in general. I do belief in the ontological role and relationship to the establishment of identity of these rituals. My main focus is directed specifically at *ulwaluko*. These rituals of Xhosa boys find a primary focus in *ulwaluko*.

This traditional rite of passage to manhood of matured Xhosa boys remains one of the most important that up to date is still practiced. It is the central institution of manhood that serves to ensure the maintenance of Xhosa identity and the continuity of cultural traditions from one generation to the next. *Ulwaluko* is perceived to be one of those acts and symbols that transforms mature Xhosa boys into men as they are ritually initiated to the ranks of manhood and incorporated into the Xhosa social structure as adults, thus gaining the 'proper social position' that includes respect, dignity, and responsibility. The ritual is viewed as a transformation of the individual and a progressive passage from exteriority to interiority as it allows the initiate to gain consciousness of his humanity. The circumcision of boys is regarded as a token of being initiated to manhood. As ontological and identity implications are essential human components, they are the primary reality around the ritual practice as it dramatises the change in status both for the individual and the wider society and reinforces a sense of belonging to the group.

The 'holy punishment'

The beliefs surrounding *ulwaluko* run very deep though it may appear senseless if not totally irrational to those outside the Xhosa belief system. Like many other ritual practices by the Xhosa, *ulwaluko* is dependent on the acceptance of their cultural myths. Although there are various Xhosa stories about the origin of *ulwaluko* the most widely known is that *So/Magwaza*[34] was the first Xhosa man to be circumcised. The *So/Magwaza* myth holds that for a Xhosa boy to be regarded as man and be accepted as grown up and a socially sensible and responsible adult he must undergo the ritual of *ulwaluko*. The Xhosa society perceives *ulwaluko* as being more than the cut, as it is often reduced to be by those who understand it less, but a profound social achievement. Among some of the people I interviewed many see *ulwaluko* as both a physical and spiritual fulfillment, and an obligation to every Xhosa boy to ensure his sense of cultural accomplishment and social belonging. It is believed that this rite of passage provides solidarity and enhances integration into the society by providing a formalised statement of the ultimate value attitudes of the people.

[34] So/Magwaza is a Xhosa legend and a sacred song that men sing during the incoming and the out coming of the initiates.

At an early age Xhosa boys witness village or township ceremonies celebrating *ulwaluko* of their older brothers or next of kin. In their growing-up they are made increasingly aware that they must undergo the ritual sooner or later and most of them look forward to the day they will be also initiated into the ranks of manhood. It is regarded as *Isiko* (a sacred custom).Zanoxolo Gitywa states that,

> ...central to the concept of manhood is the perpetuation of one's lineage in time. This can only be achieved if and when one has been initiated from boyhood into manhood through circumcision, for it is only a circumcised man - indoda - that Xhosa society allows to establish families; only such men can legally officiate as well as initiate the performance of family, lineage, clan or tribal customs which are basic to the continued existence and euphoria of the social groups mentioned (1976:139).

From this foregoing statement, it is clear that in the past traditional Xhosa society's attitude towards uncircumcised Xhosa males was that of contempt. Nothing worthwhile was expected from such a person. The harsh experience of such males that had not undergone *ulwaluko*, whether afraid or unwilling to, was sometimes that of forcible initiation. I recall as a young boy, at the age of nine, of one incident when an uncircumcised adult male, Bolokodlela, who was my mother's age, was circumcised against his will.

Ulwaluko endures and retains its value for people. Because of its mysticism it holds many meanings and allows different and changing interpretations. According to the Xhosa tradition the boy is required to undergo a period of seclusion and the test of enduring the circumcision pain and observance of related taboos while being taught Xhosa etiquette. Violence and pain are powerful forces during the initiation period of the boys. It is the violence and pain suffered by the initiates that has become one of the burning issues in the debates around *ulwaluko* in our contemporary society. The violent cutting and related dazing of the initiate is accompanied by many days of supportive oral indoctrination, healing and nurturing. During this period pain and nurturance are artfully combined as *ulwaluko* combines both positive and negative sanctions of a dominant and pervasive social order.

This 'holy punishment' as some of the interviewees called it, is followed by the reward of status. Intimidation is wedded to seduction, admonition tied to assurance, and denial bound to satisfaction.

During this period the initiate is learning skills which are aimed at building his strength and preparing him to face hard times and the responsibilities that his new status as future family head, and future leader in his community will require of him. The confinement of the initiates is coupled with promises of new freedom for the future adult. Paradoxically, it is the very men who hurt the boys who become their nurses/mothers and help in their healing as they tend and feed them throughout the seclusion period. This makes *ulwaluko* to be a trial that most Xhosas people, parents and boys, anticipate with both desire and dread.

From *ulwaluko* to circumcision

The ritual of *ulwaluko* that survives today has a complex and multi-dimensional existence in South African society. In contemporary society it is generally assumed that *ulwaluko* is the same as circumcision. This can be construed to be one of the causes of the misunderstanding that further complicates the circumcision problems and the ceaseless efforts to find alternatives to the issues surrounding the practice and enactment of the ritual. If *ulwaluko* is not circumcision then what is it and what is the difference? This has been and still is a contentious issue and central problem not only embedded in language and its use but also in the politics of its use as a carrier of culture. Hence it is of importance that one has to clarify the difference between circumcision and *ulwaluko.*

From my research this distinction between the two terms is highlighted by contentious debates around the ritual. In contemporary society these words are casually taken to mean one thing. Although *ulwaluko* and circumcision are related, they are two different things and with different meanings depending on their cultural understanding or the context in which they are used. Circumcision means the act or rite of being circumcised. From this definition one can argue that this refers to an event whereby the foreskin is cut off either as a medical operation for health reasons, for aesthetic or religious reasons and even for sexual enjoyment to others. From a Xhosa perspective circumcision is not *ulwaluko.* Its equivalent in simple Xhosa terms would be *ukwalusa* or *ukudlanga-* i.e.- the act of cutting in the context of *ulwaluko.* To be circumcised does not mean one is initiated, or *walukile,* or has undergone initiation. However, circumcision is the core ritual that is irreversible and representative of the

social maturity of the individual, a symbol of which one cannot be divested as in the case of derobing a priest or dethroning a king.

Ulwaluko according to Xhosa understanding and use means to stretch something beyond its limited scope or to weave something, be a grass mat or a rope. In a Xhosa context then *ulwaluko* differs from circumcision because it not just a cut but refers to the act of stretching something with the intent to making it straight or weaving into a new object. Thus it is a complex process. This act of stretching when applied or used in the context of the ritual implies the making, or constructing to produce something new, better and more useful. From boys men construct or weave new men. Or rather, say men systematically organise and structures the boy's behaviour. This, understood in the context of initiation, is a process of cultivating or building or instilling of manhood sensibilities and behaviour. In the context of *ulwaluko* circumcision happens once at a certain time. It then marks a particular moment of transition in ones life experience that can never be experienced as the same by any other person

In summary u*lwaluko* is the primary Xhosa institution of manhood, whose fulfilment is symbolised by seclusion from normal life, and normally authenticated by the circumcising of the boy's foreskin. This experience, occurring once only is largely invisible, existing only in memory and change of consciousness. The mark is a hidden one. The penis itself is a private and sensitive human part and even those who have undergone the ritual can only relate to each other through a special language that acknowledges the mark without showing it in public. It is an individual experience embedded in one's memory and only expressed through deeds and social conduct. Once done it is done. Jacques Derrida says that, though speaking within different context, "one time alone: circumcision takes place but once"(Fidretos 1994:3).

Stages of *ulwaluko*

The corresponding term for *ulwaluko* in English is *initiation* or what the French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep famously called the 'rites of passage'. Similarly to Arnold Van Gennep's analysis of the rites of passage, *ulwaluko* consists of stages of *separation, liminality*, and *incorporation.* The initiation ritual's entire timespan varies from place to place. According to the elders the seclusion time could take up to six months.

However due to changes that I discuss later in this dissertation this is no longer so. At the present it can sometimes last for as short a period as three weeks. The period of *separation* is characterised by the denouncing of childhood ties with the mother and joining the company of men who become their new mothers during seclusion in the 'bush'. The boyhood clothes of the initiate are given to his younger brothers and relatives. This involves symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual from his fixed point in the social structure. The boy wears no clothes, is not supposed to meet all women married to his clan and spends the duration of his seclusion with only a blanket to use for clothing and sleeping. It is a process whereby the older ways of the individual symbolically dies and he is reborn as a new being referred to as *umkhwetha,* plural *abakhwetha.*

The period of *seperation* is followed by the period of *liminality,* a stage during which the initiate takes on the role of a traveller. This is an ambiguous and anonymous stage hence the initiate has no individual or particular name, and is not called by his name but referred to as *umkhwetha*, which literally means, a student. The initiate passes through an undefined realm. He is neither where he was nor where he is headed. At this stage there is a suspension of rules and he is often impelled to do what is normally forbidden. This period has its own governing structure which differ from those of the society and the cornerstone of these structures often emphasise homogeneity, anonymity, equality as opposed to the mainstream social structures which emphasises heterogeneity, and are status-marked and name conscious.
The last stage of *incorporation* expresses symbolically the individual's re-entry into full society and into the society of men. During this period, with elaborate rituals and celebrations, emphasis is placed on togetherness and sharing. A new name is given to the newly-initiated man. Heterogeneity and individualism is encouraged however it must not be for personal glory but for the good of the group.

***Ubudoda* (Manhood)**

Ubudoda is one of the concepts that are losing meaning and value in our contemporary society to the point that many misinterpret it as merely the cutting of the foreskin. In the following lines I set out to define *ubudoda* and its meaning according to the Xhosa understanding of the concept.

It can be argued that the devotion, and adherence of Xhosas to *ulwaluko* and their intense concern with what it does and can achieve, derives much from the ritual's power to provide varying/multiple and even contested meanings of what Xhosa-ness and identity means. Gitywa states that "manhood, in the Xhosa context of the word, does not only refer to the physical operation of circumcision, nor the social conferment of the status, but embraces inter-alia, an expected change of personality, increased responsibility, reliability and respectability"(1976:138). Through undergoing it, boys gain adult status, and permission to establish his own family, to preside over sacred and ceremonial activities and are given more social responsibilities. Thus circumcision, or the 'cutting', can then be said to form one part or act and a single building block towards the constitution of the whole, which is *ulwaluko*.

In the Xhosa society, without undergoing *ulwaluko,* a Xhosa male has no authority and cannot participate in decision-making and other important social matters. This is so because tradition holds that he is not regarded as *indoda* (man), and thus socially, his scope of social participation, interaction and relationship is narrowed. He is perceived as one who resists growth and this is seen as a refusal to conform to social expectations and requirements. Thus he remains a social infant or misfit. In other words, he is seen not only denying the concept of *ubudoda* but also that of his identity as a Xhosa. Nelson Mandela speaking of his initiation in his book *Long Walk To Freedom* says, " I had now taken the essential step in the life of every Xhosa man. Now I might marry, set up my own home and plough my own field. I could now be admitted to the council of the community [and] my words could be taken seriously" (1994: 33). Today these above expressed sentiments are fading due to the transformations that our society is undergoing every day. For instance although it is still viewed as a taboo for a boy to marry and start his own family, we frequently witness this happening in our communities in both urban and rural areas.

The characteristics by which a man is defined differs from society to society. To understand *ubudoda* or 'manliness/manhood' one needs to understand what is *indoda* (one who has undergone *ulwaluko*), according to the Xhosa culture. Although basically men make a boy into an *indoda,* paradoxically the boy is the prerequisite for the existence of the man. There can be no *indoda* without a boy. General speaking

indoda or *ubudoda* is the word generally applied to, or in recognition of positive acts and behaviours performed by a person, whether male or female, but most often applied to young or adult males, whether initiated or not. *Indoda* is a male who has properly undergone the process of *ulwaluko* according to the dictates of the culture and customs of his nation as noted earlier. Among the Xhosa society, philosophically speaking, such a person is defined by his actions in relation to others. This does not mean that age and other qualities of manhood do not count too. The way he handles and respects his fellow beings and his philosophical strength are powerful and desirable qualities. He is a provider for and protector of both his family and society. Therefore *ubudoda* is the embodiment of all the positive attributes that signify male and social maturity, manifested by dignity, respect and responsibility. These attributes are reinforced or endorsed through ulwaluko. *Ubudoda or indoda* is characterised by a set of learnt and performed moral values and social expectations that find their full and dramatic expression in *ulwaluko*. Hence the uncircumcised male or female, regardless of age, who performs positive acts and behaves in a way that reflect the good qualities and social expectations of an *indoda,* are metaphorically also called *uyindoda.*

Paradoxically from the responses I received during my research, this fearful trial is something that most parents are proud of and desire for their children when the time is right. Most Xhosa boys look forward to undergoing it some day in the hope that it will lead to more respect and status, the emphasis being that *ulwaluko lisiko* is a rite or custom that every Xhosa boy must undergo to be regarded as a Xhosa man. However, it seems the most crucial motives behind the initiation is the construction through indoctrination of a responsible and sociable adult that as an individual is a vital building block in the structure of any healthy society and in the positive unfolding of history.

7. TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS

Ambivalent identities

The inroads made by colonialism with its imposition of Western cultural values on Africans and their cultural practices have led to destabilisation and ambivalence of African identities. Some Africans devalue their own cultural practices, their right to think and determine their destiny as free people, as they constantly disrupt and undermine those cultural values using unconsidered conceptions and theories based on Eurocentric world views. Haki Madhubuti observes the passing off of Euro-Western socio-economic and political theories as objective wisdom thus: "capitalism permeates Black life in ways that inhibit the majority of Blacks from functioning in their own best interest" (1993:3). The perils and the damage inflicted on the African child by such views manifest themselves in or through the exaltation by some Africans of the Western world-view and their subservience to foreign values and systems. Araeen states clearly that "the aim of foreign (Western) domination, ... is to take dominated people out of their history and dislodge them from [a] particular historical position, thereby destroying their sense of direction" (1994: 81).

Debates

Undergoing *ulwaluko* did not pose the same major health problems to traditional societies as it does now in our contemporary times. Over the past six years or so, despite the fact that open debates on *ulwaluko* are still regarded as taboo in some circles and even suppressed in others, the tensions and conflict around the practice have proliferated. Circumcisions that have gone wrong have often put the ritual in the spotlight of heated debate and widespread criticism. While numbers of initiates end up in hospitals, this supposedly secret and sacred ritual has come under severe public criticism. As heated debates take place between those who are traditionalists and modernists, pro- and anti- *ulwaluko* battles continue, centred often on issues of individual rights, cultural rights, identity, gender, age and class politics. A lot is said, through the media about *ulwaluko*. Most of the criticism from the modernists and feminist circles place emphasis on the risk that initiates are exposed to during this period: for instance exposure to unhygienic procedures and cold conditions, and the unskilled traditional methods used by some Africans.

Values at risk

Controversy continues around the participation of females in decision-making in issues pertaining to the lives of their children and their constitutional rights as females to take full part in the discussions around *ulwaluko*. While some are fighting for the perpetuation of its secret and sacred status, the significance, value and relevance of the ritual practice in contemporary society is being widely questioned. Added to this is the adverse behaviour of today's initiated youths that raises concern and points to a loss of effectiveness of the ritual as a vehicle of transition into responsible adulthood. Busiwe, a female graduate from the University of Cape Town emphasised the lack of what she prefers to call 'manliness' in today's youths. For her and many of the people interviewed the general concern expressed was that today's man no longer adheres to traditional notions of manhood which used to be the characteristics of a Xhosa man. Asked if there is still any significance and relevance in the practice of *ulwaluko*, Busiwe remarked with animosity "...nowadays one cannot differentiate between a boy and a man, according to [the] Xhosa definition of manliness. So there is no more value [to *ulwaluko*], thus [it is] useless. Why should we waste our time and resources on a practice that is no longer producing the desired needs".[35] From some of the responses one can sense lamentation and nostalgia for lost tradition and social values that used to be virtues of manhood. What happened to these traditional values? Where are the fathers who used to be the family protectors, and providers of both physical and spiritual support to their families and society? Today how many initiated men in our society are killers, rape and abuse women and children and perpetuate family violence and murder? Even though answers are difficult to find, such questions are profound and relevant to ask in our contemporary society. The roots of such problems are complex, but answers must be reached and solutions constructed. Thus the debate is a crucial one and must continue so that we can come to the resolution of the problems.

For better understanding of the problems that arise from circumcision, one has to take into consideration that these problems do not exist in a vacuum. They are inextricably related to the socio-political and economic state black people found themselves trapped in under the capitalist system premised on promoting Euro-American values.

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[35] Interview with Busiwe Dlova Cape Town, September 1999.

The impact of foreign intrusion; irresponsible parents; the *ngcibis* (surgeons) who cannot control their *midlanga* (circumcising blades), let alone sterilise them while performing those vital cuts; the increasing number of inexperienced *makhankatha* (guardians), and the ignorance and arrogance of the initiates, have tainted and destabilised the ritual practice. Be it a choice or not, the truth is that in our contemporary society circumcision is dangerous as it maims and kills. Hence, it is of critical importance at this point in time, as existed with its early practitioners, that it be done under serious supervision of those who fully understand every aspect of the practice. Our present environment and our diverse lifestyles must be taken into serious consideration if we are to find a way forward through the tensions and conflicts in which our society is engulfed.

Despite the fact that open debates around *ulwaluko* are discouraged, frowned upon and suppressed in contemporary South Africa, the tensions and conflicts that arise from circumcisions that are mishandled have put the ritual practice in the spotlight. For example in 1996, in the Eastern Cape, a chilling and terrifying story of circumcisions that led to the death of some initiates and left scores mutilated for life in Lusikisiki made headlines, arousing fears amongst many people. Over recent years, every initiation season leaves several initiates dead, scores mutilated for life, while others have their penises amputated. Many parents (and boys alike) who hear and witness these stories are cowed as they confront the idea that their children have to undergo *ulwaluko.*

Initiatives

Although the problems of malpractice of circumcision have become common throughout South Africa, this occurrence had earlier been associated with urban settlements such as Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town. However this is no longer so as is clearly expressed in Dr. Chabula's words when she states that "the problem [of circumcision] is only being spoken about in the Eastern Cape. It has to be on the national agenda [as] it is happening in other provinces too, but not spoken about".[36] For example the City Press newspaper in Gauteng reported the existence of bogus initiation schools run by thugs who abduct boys in the Vaal Triangle.

[36] Cape Argus, 27/02/2001.

Responding to these crises there are some people who ceaselessly put their efforts into the restoration of the ritual to its sacred status and to bringing back dignity and value to the custom - even if a compromise has to be struck between the traditional and the modern practice. Hence the establishment of the *Circumcision Task Team* in 1999 at East London, and also the *Western District Council* intervention committee which serves the larger section of the Port Elizabeth community. Acknowledgement should be given to the *Motherwell Traditional Surgeons and Attendants Association*, which has become the backbone of this campaign in Port Elizabeth, and which continues to grow. A recent move was made in Idutywa, (rural Eastern Cape) under the Xhosa king Xolilizwe Sigcawu, to establish an initiation school to be run by a respected traditional surgeon... whose appointment it is hoped and expected will counteract the many problems experienced".[37]

Some changes in the ritual practice

It is a fact that society evolves and so does its culture, customs and traditions. Culture is dynamic and no tradition and custom can claim to be the exact repetition of an earlier one as it evolves with time. As a Xhosa man I cannot fail to notice some of the changes that have taken place in the practice of *ulwaluko*. From the time of contact with other Africans and later with the Europeans, *ulwaluko* has undergone some drastic and significant as well as trivial changes. It has been affected as part of a broad cultural contact condition between the Xhosa and the Europeans. Initiation, since it was incorporated into the whole Xhosa way of life and culture, has not only been affected by the direct Western onslaught against traditional indigenous practices, but also indirectly by changes in other areas of Xhosa culture. For instance, the experience of undergoing circumcision in hospital deviates from the convention. However, the ritual's underlying principles have not necessarily changed, as it is possible for the 'modernity' that has crept in to affect the form and not its meaning.

As to the question of how meaningful the practice is to contemporary Xhosa people, that is another debate that would need more space than this document and time allows. What one can say at the moment is that u*lwaluko* has survived the transition from countryside to urban location as well as the trauma of Christianisation and

[37] Daily Dispatch: 07.01.2000

Western education. It is still performed by the Xhosa to mark the transition from boyhood to manhood regardless of religion, class, income, education or any other likely variables. However, some differences occur between rural and urban, Christian and educated and non-Christians/non-Western educated sectors of the Xhosa society. This can be attributed to various factors. One example is the education system that has changed much of the African's understanding of the world, restricted movement and contributed to the ever-increasing urbanisation. From its conception in South Africa, Western based schooling was met with resistance that varied in intensity and duration. It was viewed with suspicion and regarded as a European instrument to bring more effective denial of the customs such as *ulwaluko* by the Xhosa. In our society Western forms of education and development, as symbolised by schools and churches, have become key institutions of control. In contemporary society most black children undergo Western formal education and belong to churches. It is through the 'certificate system' of these institutions that black children's maturity and social status is judged, thus displacing the traditional significance of Xhosa institutions like *ulwaluko*.

The issue here is not about the merits and the demerits of Western education, rather about the aggressive cultural propaganda and unconvincing moral values that deceive Africans and alienate them from their own cultural value base. This education system is premised on Western values and primarily directed at brainwashing the African child. It persists in distorting and destroying his or her social values, sense of identity and understanding of the world. The corollary of this course of action is the equation of education with literacy, something that was entirely divorced from the culture and the moral values of the Xhosa people. Out of these Western institutions of 'power-education' springs a new African elite with a different outlook to that of traditional Xhosa communal-based, social and educational structures that resisted the culture of the coloniser. Gitywa bewails the fact that,

> ... the Europeans brought to the African ... schooling which, however important it may be, constitutes but a portion of the total process of social and cultural learning. Such schooling when transplanted to Africa set up far-reaching discontinuities between the school and the rest of the African child's social and cultural environment...schooling when taken from the... [Africans] by churches and governments, served to weaken the kin group. Not only the

> control of education but [Western] education no longer served traditional patterns of socialisation (1976:267).

The continuing industrial and consequently high rate of urbanisation has produced extensive changes in the Xhosa social system. In our day it has become difficult to separate boys from men as in schools they are all identified as students, and as workers at the work place, and all are treated the same with no manhood status attached or special respect accorded. Be it in rural or urban areas, one witnesses the tensions and conflicts as people negotiate these social spaces. Contemporary Xhosa youths, apart from their individual feelings, are torn by the conflicts between the two cultures - those of Africa and the West. The latter has proved to be irresistible as 'tribal' identity fades away and new identities are constructed and old identities reconstituted. It is not surprising in our time to find that within one family two totally different worlds co-exist in one household. Parents might have never attended school but their children may be attending university and have different stances towards traditional cultural practices to those of their parents.

Conflict and desire

In such conditions there are two different worlds living together under one roof with different sets of expectations. These mould the attitudes of today's parents and youths concerning *ulwaluko*. Controversy has characterised the history of *ulwaluko* (and as said before we seasonally have initiates' wards in different hospitals around the country). In our contemporary society, in both rural and urban areas, there are fiery debates generated by the complications and fatal injuries that arise from current circumcision practices. Perhaps, among the Xhosa no issue is debated with as much passion as the practice and representation of *ulwaluko*. The thread of social relationships is under severe pressure and being stretched to a breaking point. These debates tend to be confrontational, polarising those that practice it and those who perceive it to be dangerous and want to save the initiates from its dangers, as these following newspaper extracts show.

About three years ago a Cape Town artist, David Hlongwane, was stabbed in the eye after a heated debate in which he argued that *ulwaluko* is a dangerous practice.[38]

[38] Smith 1997: Cape Argus, Cape Town.

Two years back an East London newspaper reported that, "cultures clash in Lusikisiki circumcision wars. Health officials in the Griqualand [have] voiced concerns about the increasing number of deaths and botched circumcisions performed by untrained traditional surgeons and the escalating faction fights over ritual in the Lusikisiki area".[39] While a recent national television news report about circumcision casualties in Cape Town showed a chilling image of a young man who was gravely ill and suffering the agony of an infected circumcision wound.[40] These incidents have brought the ritual of *ulwaluko* to a point where it is an ordeal that most Xhosa families, especially boys, anticipate with dread. The young man suffering this ordeal maintained that his case was one of misfortune and his view, notwithstanding his negative experience, was that the tradition should continue.

Some of the uninitiated youth I interviewed both in rural and urban settings expressed contradictory views on the issue of *ulwaluko*. Most boys and parents fear it, but whatever attitude they have, many Xhosa boys nevertheless undergo the ritual. In most cases, it seems, this dreaded test and ordeal is something that most boys even look forward to undergoing some day because of its transformative values and meanings, the desire for a sense of belonging and the affirmation of group identity. One newly initiated young man, echoing the words of many that I spoke to saw *ulwaluko* as,

> an old Xhosa custom that will go on for a long time and people [outsiders] should stop making fuss about it. If they do not understand it they should leave it to the people who know. It is what makes us *us*. *Lisiko lethu ma*Xhosa and without it [as a Xhosa] you are like a Christian without a Bible. You know the lost son story in the Bible...[41]

This statement suggests that the performance of *ulwaluko* remains desirable as it is viewed as an affirmation of identity and an assertion that the African mind has not been colonised and retains control over its own value systems. Others who approach the ritual more superficially undergo it only so that there is no impediment or delay when the time arrives to demand their rights: of inheritance; to secure a wife; establish a household like his peers and gain a degree of independence from elders.

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[39] Daily Dispatch newspaper dated 17 of July 1999.
[40] SABC news 02 February: 2001.
[41] Interview with Zondani Qhobhoka, Cape Town, December 2000.

However some dissenting voices, mainly those of the educated minority, see it as an old-fashioned practice which no longer has any validity given the nature of our modern environment. These people further cite the national constitution to justify their stand as it guarantees freedom of individual rights. This constitution as stated enshrines the freedom and security of persons in which everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity. This right to security and control over his or her body implies choosing to be circumcised or not. Paradoxically, it further states that the persons belonging to a particular culture, religion, etc. may not be denied their right to enjoy their traditional practices thereby giving formal expression to their belief system.

In spite of this, the same constitution does not sanction these practices in a way that could involve fatalities in the observance of cultural acts and values. An uncritical sanction of a practice would mean that it infringes the very same rights and freedoms that it purports to uphold, as malpractice then becomes an abuse of human rights. It is indeed a complex process to deal with the issues related to this practice. To further strengthen their case some of the anti-circumcision groups state that, like many other forms of power and social control, *ulwaluko* is used by the older generation to protect their own interests and power and to retain domination of the young. These responses came mostly from those who grew up in urban areas and are studying at universities. Some argue from a feminist perspective and see it as a manifestation of male domination that uncritically masquerades in the much-abused names of tradition and custom.

The issue of hospitalisation

Even though *ulwaluko* today is an open secret, open debates around it are still discouraged and frowned upon and even suppressed. Many, even those aware of these contentious problems choose to keep silent. There are many reasons for this silence. Secrecy is one of the underlying codes of conduct that governs the practice and participation in *ulwaluko.* As a sacred Xhosa institution and rite of passage into manhood it remains a sensitive subject and the dominant view is that no sensible 'Xhosa man' is free to enter into discussion with outsiders. However, difficult as it is, (and many people are cowed when confronted by the issue), the necessity of the debate and the urgent need for a resolution of the debate must be understood. It is a

difficult debate however because the demands of the commercial and exploitative spirit of our capitalist world leaves us with no breathing space to negotiate and control the smooth transformation of our cultural practices into our contemporary context.

I have stated earlier that these days in every initiation season hospital wards become full with initiates who suffer the agony of circumcision problems. Some recover. However, most of these young men after having delayed their admission often arrive in hospital seriously ill. For most of them, to be admitted or seek help in the hospital is the last option they want to consider, because of the severity of the stigma attached to hospitalisation. In many cases, even if the initiates are not opposed to this option, *amakhankatha* and even family members usually are. Many prefer to stay in the bush and suffer in silence trying to make themselves believe it is all part of becoming a 'man'. Those who have been hospitalised not only suffer from the trauma of mutilation or amputation of their penises, they are also taunted, ostracised and even denied the dignity of being called a 'man'. These unfortunates are often referred to as *onofotyela*, or 'hospital man'. As stated by Dlakavu, "one thing's for sure, no one wants to come to hospital because if they do, the others will not call them *amadoda*".[42] The question to ask is why do all these things happen? Who is at fault? Who is to blame here? What are the deep-rooted causes?

Problematic changes

Being a Xhosa who often witnesses and participates in the ritual performance, I have noted certain changes. The seclusion period has tended to become shorter. For example unlike in traditional societies where the period of exclusion was about three to six months, two to three weeks is the most common duration at the present. Some of the reasons for this change being that those who are students and those who have taken leave from work are forced to reduce the period to short absences in order to comply with school and work schedules. For the same reason the period of *ubukrwala* (newly initiated Xhosa males) has been condensed and in some cases reduced to zero. One of the most radical changes that has become a contentious issue is the performance of circumcision by Western medical practitioners, especially females, in hospitals.

[42] Interview with Dlakavu, Mbewu July 2001, Cape Town.

In some cases these boys are not secluded, as they would be in traditional sense. They live their normal lives at home until such time as their wounds heal and the bandages removed by the doctor. In such a situation the stages of initiation and its related procedures are not fulfilled. There is no separation, liminality, and incorporation of the initiate. No sacrificial rituals are performed. There is no burning of the lodge. There is no anointment of the young men and no coming-out ceremony in the community. Instead, the family and relatives hold an informal 'dinner' to which only close friends and a chosen few are invited. Thus in such a situation all the significant ritual stages of preparation, separation, transition and transformation are omitted.

This loss of the symbolic and conceptual stages of the ritual together with their profound meanings has resulted in a deeply problematic situation. Mr Krila, an interviewee, comments that,

> the importance and the significance of practices like *ulwaluko* as a place for learning manhood is being distorted and undermined. How can we expect boys born and bred in modern times, whose parents have lost their roots long before they were born to go through traditional *ulwaluko*? Given such a situation who is going to lead them through the ritual, when *iingcibi* and *amakhankatha*, in the true sense of the words, even in the so-called traditional/rural areas are rare to find? Hence, the mutilations and fatal injuries our children, an experience, which has become highly sensationalised by our media.[43]

The major role players in ulwaluko

***Abazali/* Parents**

Traditionally, parents played a key role in the initiation of their children. It was their inviolable right and duty to choose who would officiate throughout the initiation of their children. Even when a boy goes to be initiated without the consent of his parents (*ukuziba* is a common occurrence these days), parents were still morally bound to take up the responsibility, for it was upon them that the social implications and necessary ritual and economic preparations devolved. They took responsibility for arranging and checking the procedure and always made sure that the safety of the initiate's life was of primary importance. They took upon themselves the task of making sure that the boy was fit and prepared both physically and spiritually, for the ritual.

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[43] Interview with Krila, March, 2001, Engcobo.

For example, before initiation the boy was taken to a medical doctor whose job was to strengthen the boy both psychologically and physically, to ward off evil spirits and provide protection against bewitchment. They made sure that he did not engage in sexual intercourse, a practice that has become so common among today's youth, to avoid complications such as sexually transmitted disease. The parents (usually father or a male relative) choice of *ingcibi* was based not only on the man's physical ability to perform the operation, but rather on his social standing and reputation in terms of respect, knowledge, experience and good circumcision record.

This is often one of the difficult tasks that families face today as it has become a widespread phenomenon among boys to go to any surgeon without their parents' consent. This is further complicated by the increasing number of families that are headed by single parents (mothers in most cases), who always are faced with many difficulties when it comes to the question of their boys initiation. In her book investigating the ways by which the problem of circumcision wounds and related infection can be prevented, Funani states that "the fact that initiates end up in hospital shows neglect among the Africans"(1990:54). The role of parents in making sure that the experience of their children is a safe one remains a crucial and primary need. *Ulwaluko* is a long established Xhosa custom and seemingly had posed no major problems to the community until the last decade of the twentieth century.

A recent SABC national news footage on circumcision malpractice shocked many people and illustrated the dangers that face young boys if something is not done to rectify and restore the practice into its sacrosanct status, and recover responsibility in all role players. The boy's story illustrated this parental negligence and loss of understanding in the performance of the ritual practice.

***Ingcibi* (surgeon)**

The ingcibi is one of the important people the family has to decide upon. He, like the guardian, is chosen on the basis of his experience and must be a known man with good, steady and clean hands. At present there are too few competent *iingcibi* who understand fully their role and responsibility and there is a growing number of

opportunistic, untrained and incompetent bush *ingcibi.* During my research trip in the Eastern Cape one woman I interviewed, a mother of a boy whose penis was badly cut by a drunken surgeon during the circumcision procedure said,

> we may appreciate tradition as an expression of cultural autonomy but *ulwaluko* (circumcision), be it educative or whatever, if authentic in the principles it stands for, should aim at truth, equality, love and [a]healthy wholesome life. It can not be true if it aims at diseases and the mutilation of bodies of our children.[44]

The above statement is pertinent. I too find it necessary to ask what benefits our society gains from such traumas and violence other than the tension and conflicts that destroy friendship, parental trust, respect and create confusion and dissent within and among families and communities? In response to these problems many people, myself included, have begun to question and examine the relevance, significance and abuses of traditional cultural practices like *ulwaluko.* In the present situation many parents fear for their children's' lives under the hands of 'bush surgeons'. Sichone states that "in recent years the fear of infection had forced many parents to stop the practice" (1998:13).

***Amakhankatha* (nurses or guardians)**

At the present time any man who has been initiated may be allowed to act as *ikhankatha.* Traditionally his role was to look after the initiates' well-being and remain with them for the entire seclusion period. In choosing who is going to be *ikhankatha*, parents need be far more critical than they generally are at the present time. Traditionally, the person who qualified for this task was someone who was well known for his temperament, knowledge, and social responsibility. This man had to take the responsibility very seriously as all the blame would be put on him should the initiates misbehave, die in seclusion, or fail to disport themselves as befits men after the out-coming ceremony. In our Westernized society this seems to be the reverse and this position continues to deteriorate. In many of the cases that I have witnessed the people who most often become *amakhankatha* are either those who have the time,

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[44] Mampinga (not her real name) said these sad words after his son was badly injured by a drunken *ingcibi.* Interview, July 1999, Engcobo. In 1998, in my home village an *ingcibi*, a former Western-trained medical nurse, cut a boy's penis instead of the foreskin. It is said that that night it was both a dark night and he very drunk and under these circumstances he could not see clearly what he was doing. However to my surprise some parents still send their boys to this same man to be circumcised.

(who may be any man who is not working). It frequently happens that most of these people are the best 'bottle hitters'. It is not likely that a drunkard is always clean when he dresses the initiate's wound or that his hands are steady. This careless approach conflicts with crucially important health and hygiene requirements. In some cases you find traditionally-circumcised boys assigned to a Western circumcised-man (the hospital man), who does not have the background experience and knowledge of handling manhood, a phenomenon that is problematic. How can the blind lead the blind?

Ikhankatha plays a crucial role in both teaching and taking care of the initiate during the seclusion period. Traditionally, the chief in consultation with his councilors and the families concerned chose such persons. The *ikhankatha* is supposed to be a practitioner of cleanliness both outside and inside. He must desire to clean his hands and heart too. Like the 'Western nurse' he is supposed to be a person of courage when he handles manhood. He has to build the initiate with his hands as well as his words of wisdom and must have a sharp eye to notice damage. Although there have been some moves towards the appointment and education of guardians for the initiates, to this day little has been done towards achieving this end.

***Abakhwetha* (initiates)**

The arrogance of some initiates who undergo the ritual practice without the consent of their parents have many times resulted in problems as they lack the parental support that is so vitally needed during this period of transition. Some of them may not have seriously prepared themselves. They may also not be physically and psychologically prepared for the ordeal and ready to deal with the demanding requirements initiates have to adhere to during the seclusion. Others run away, as was the case of the initiate in my village who was caught in town fully clothed. When reprimanded by men he said he was trying to get to the hospital because his *ikhankatha* was not doing the proper job. Suprisingly, after being taken and forced to return to the *ibhuma* it emerged that he was lying. The reason for running away was that he could not deal with the pain and was overwhelmed by fear, as he was too young and both physically and psychologically unprepared for initiation.

There is more to being a man in the Xhosa culture than surviving the *ingcibi's* cut. Many boys will not go for a risk-free circumcision in hospitals because of the stigma this carries. The issue of the declining dignity of man has been obscured and clouded by the issue of initiates ending up in hospitals, and with some suffering for life because circumcisions have been mishandled. The ritual practice of *ulwaluko* is beset by these problems and many people are questioning its major aspect, that of transformation. Why do their boys have to go through such an agonizing pain to become a man in the name of tradition? The custom has been so tainted and subverted by Western influence that it is rendered almost devoid of dignity and meaning. In this way traditional institutions have their work cut out to survive meaningfully in contemporary society.

***Unofotyela* (Hospital circumcised man)**

To circumcise in hospital is as bad as not being circumcised. The 'hospital man' has become a burning issue fuelling the crisis that besets the custom of *ulwaluko*. From the point of view of the traditional protagonists this practice is different to circumcision. They argue that the word circumcision does not exist in the Xhosa vocabulary. Its popular usage in contemporary society can be attributed to the increasing erosion of African cultures and the suppression of indigenous languages.

For them this word refers to a foreskin operation performed by a Western medical doctor, regardless of gender distinction in a hospital context. It is common as said before, to see *amakrwala* interrogating each other to establish if one of them is a hospital man.

However, it should be noted, this concern with language has its dangers and societal drawbacks as it encloses one within a specific culture. Language, like *ulwaluko* is a historical formation that tells us very little about the individuality of those who speak it. It limits and shackles human liberty when it becomes a deciding factor that either unites or divides people, or identifies them for life or death. It should be understood that *ulwaluko* goes beyond the cutting of the foreskin. The hospital or similar institutions do not offer more than the cut and cannot prepare and teach the initiate traditional norms and manhood values, as manhood goes beyond the cutting. The cut

and the pain, which follows, coupled with relevant teachings and symbolic rituals, are the means that shape the initiate's character.

Isolation, ostracisation and the denial of the status that goes with being a man is often the punishment if one is found to be hospital-circumcised. Such a person is denied the status of being a man as he becomes a non 'real-man', hence the term *'unofotyela'*, one who is excluded in some 'manly' issues. This has also caused misunderstanding and often results in fights among the young men. What I find more interesting is the following - that the issue of 'hospital-man is not the real issue. Looking at *ulwaluko* in context, it is interesting to note that the stigmatisation itself contributes to the problems that the ritual faces. For reasons that I do not fully understand, these people (hospital-men) take up responsibilities as *amakhankatha* to initiates who are traditionally circumcised. This is where some of the problems start. Faced with a ritual, to which he himself (hospital man) is an outsider, he is a stranger to the tools, the methods and medicine. Therefore he is valueless to the well-being of the initiates, let alone their spiritual and moral education. It is likely that such initiates will end up in hospital if lucky enough not to die or lose their male reproductive organs under such an uninformed supervisor.

The question then remains why parents continue to appoint such people as guardians to their children at one of the most crucial moments in their lives? Most people I spoke to state that such things happen because of the stigma that goes with hospital circumcision. In most cases the hospital man fears to reveal his manhood status because of societal ostracisation and stigmatisation. However this does not absolve the parents of their responsibility. To choose such unqualified people indicates that the parents have done little or no thorough research to be able to make a well-informed choice of the person in whose hands they will put the future of their children.

Commercialisation of the ritual

The commercialisation of *ulwaluko* has become another contributing factor to these problems as the ritual has become a profitable business, especially in a social context of high unemployment. Many people have found *ulwaluko* to be a lucrative business in which to specialise, albeit with less or no consideration or respect for the human

life that is often put in jeopardy. It has attracted many pseudo-*ngcibis* whose primary desire and interests are for financial gain and liquor.

From the number of *ingcibis* I interviewed, on the subject of the fees, Tshangane in Engcobo was the cheapest, charging two rand for circumcising a boy. This fine *ingcibi* has been practising since I was a young boy in my hometown, his work record is impressive and he is highly respected by the community. While the charges of all others ranged between one hundred and two hundred rands and a bottle of brandy his charge was exceedingly modest. When I asked Tshangane if he knew of others who still charge as little as he does, he told me of his grandson who has been persuading him to go to Cape Town where he would make a fortune if he could develop his job as a serious business. In Cape Town in every initiation season traditional surgeons make a high income as the cost for cutting the foreskin ranges between one hundred and thirty five rands to two hundred rands. In some places the corruption in the ritual practice has risen to unimaginable proportions. This is not only so in Cape Town as a recent City Press newspaper reported that "police at Sebokeng in the Vaal Triangle have launched a manhunt for the [*inyangas]* and tutors who are allegedly running a bogus initiation school in the area in order to make money. An initiate is expected to pay between R500 and R1000 after "graduating" as an adult".[45]

Making money in this way has created a secondary industry. The abduction of young boys has become a common occurrence in the Vaal Triangle where the kidnappers are said to receive fifty rands commission for each boy they bring to the bogus initiation schools. This not only leaves parents with debts to pay to these hawkers, some have to suffer the pain of seeing children dying in hospitals or maimed for life. The high number of boys to be initiated makes the *iingcibi* who are primarily after money rush the process so that they can make still more money. In a recent Cape Argus report in the Western Cape, Xolo Mpondozephela said, "the *iingcibi* and caretakers who are after money often rush the process so they [that] can move to other waiting boys".[46]

The financial aspect of *ulwaluko* has become a major contributing factor to its problems. Everything that is needed for initiation has to be bought. Every family has

[45] City Press, 9 January: 2000.
[46] Interview with Mpondozephela, July, 2001, Cape Town.

to save in advance for the ritual. This involves the purchasing of the sacrificial animals, (goat, sheep, and cattle needed for the ritual) and the many cases of brandy and beer to accompany *umqombhothi* (traditional Xhosa) beer for the ceremonies associated with the performance. On top of this are needed blankets for the initiate; the sacrificial animals for *umngeno* (incoming); *umosiso* or *ukojisa* (a ritual performed to introduce the initiates to eat every food - with no English equivalent for these terms) and *umphumo* or *umgidi* (home coming ceremony or coming-out ceremony). After this last ceremony everything that the *ikrwala* (newly initiated man) uses has to be new, from the feet to the head. In this time of economic crisis in which black people suffer most, it has become extremely difficult for the working class, and more especially the poor who live below the bread line, to afford these necessities.

8. NOTES ON PRACTICAL WORK

Introduction

Dealing with *ulwaluko* as the subject presupposes some kind of ritualistic approach in the execution of the work itself. There are multiple and complex issues that are raised by the ritual practice and its representation in contemporary South African society. The controversial debates, tensions and conflicts around the ritual and the politics of its representation, with some racial undertones in the context of the South African visual arts arena have, provided the generative impulse in my creative process. The source of inspiration throughout the production of my body of practical work is rooted in integral elements of the *ulwaluko* ritual. The iconography, materials, colours, patterns and textures - all aspects of aesthetic form - are drawn from a well of memories, experiences and insights related to this ritual. The work is deeply subjective: it is a journey from outside to the inside as it reveals and conceals what I perceive as truths about *ulwaluko*. The sequence of works represents a journey from exteriority - rendering glimpses of figurative imagery - to an interiority that moves away from what is seen and figuratively depicted, to a visual language of symbolism and abstraction.

The creative impulse has been driven both by the will to preserve interpretative visual records for future generations and the desire for a better understanding, in the contemporary context, of this age-old custom which still holds us in its aura and draws us to its mysticism. Another impulse is the desire to explore alternative epistemological processes and mediums that diverge from conventional visual forms of articulation and representation, in relation to *ulwaluko*. The work is executed with the full intention to subvert the stereotypical images of the ritual that too often have been presented to us in the South African visual arena.

In times of intense social changes, like South Africa at present, there is a need for new ways of responding to the challenges that our daily life presents to us. The work also is centrally concerned with issues of identity: its construction and reconstruction, and the problematics of visual representations in post-apartheid South Africa.

While exploring the complexities and contradictions inherent in the ritual, the work nevertheless attempts to conceal its secrets. The works are deliberately both a factual and imaginary representation of moments in memory, witnessed and experienced in

the performance of the ritual. They attempt to be both provocative yet palatable, with a dreamlike, metaphysical intent, aiming both to aesthetically seduce and confront the viewer.

The paintings and drawings represent a point of departure in the journey from the exterior (the everyday seen reality of *ulwaluko*), to the interior (a more metaphysical reality that the Blanket and the Skin Series strive to represent). From a more figurative meta-narrative form of representation the work develops to a more abstract (though still figurative in some ways) form. This shift of form came into fruition owing to my search for a visual mode of expression capable of rendering my subjective experience more fully than the confines of factual autobiography would allow. Thus the work is a blend of autobiography and social commentary, as it is intrinsically connected to my individual and emotional experience on one hand while speaking simultaneously of collective and shared social experience on the other.

Source Material

The body of my practical work has developed and been determined by both secondary sources (stories and images I found sifting through photographs in books, magazines and newspaper reports, plus my own photographs), as well as primary sources. The primary material comprised mainly oral material drawn from my field research (narratives, interviews and debates) plus memory and observation. In the initial stages, preparatory sketches were made from these images and stories and my observation during visits to the *iibhuma* (initiate's lodge), and through my imaginative recollections of the ritual performances that I have participated in and witnessed. These sketches were later synthesised and developed to form this body of practical work.

Materials used

In the search for an aesthetic form that defies the stereotypical representation of the ritual of *ulwaluko* I chose to work with materials resonant with ritual significance.

The choice and use of materials such as sheep and goat' skins, fabrics worn by women, *umgquba* (animal manure, especially that of cattle, goats and sheep), initiates' blankets, wood, and *ingceke* (white clay used to smear the initiates body during the period of their seclusion), have not only been inspired by the search for alternative

ways of representation and presentation. They are used for their profound significance to the performance of the ritual practice and also to challenge conventional perceptions of what painting is or should be like. *Umgquba*, which acts as a backdrop or textural field in the Skin Series, is of crucial importance in the understanding of *ulwaluko* in its proper context. The animal manure is found in the cattle fold. This is one of the important sites to the Xhosa as it is believed it is where ancestors gather when visiting the home. Traditionally the owner of the homestead, who was always the father, was buried at the kraal's gate. Over and above this is the fact that *ulwaluko* starts and ends at the kraal: thus the kraal is a sacred site.

Colour

Colour forms an important element in my work, as it has symbolic significance. As I worked, it became increasingly relevant as it alludes to the colours mostly used during the ritual performance of *ulwaluko*. For instance white represents both *ifutha* or *ingceke* (the initiates' paint) as well as the preferable colour for the sacrificial animal, ie.the goat. It is also the colour of the blankets the initiates use during their seclusion period. Red refers to both life and death. The blood that the initiate sheds during the circumcision symbolises the death of childhood behaviour and the emergence of a new social being, the 'man'. It also refers to the colour of the earth pigment used to smear the body and face of the 'new man' to symbolise his newly- acquired status as *ikrwala*. Green represents and reflects the natural vegetation, and alludes to the indigenous green plant used for healing the initiate's wound, and appears in most of the images. While the brown colour expresses the colour of *ibhuma,* the initiate's lodge that traditionally was made out of dry grass. However these days it is built with whatever material is accessible. For example in some places people use plastic bags while others use rags or maize bags.

Scale of the works

My practical work is comprised of a series of earlier drawings and paintings on paper and canvas, and a final series of drawings and paintings on blankets and skins. Although the scale of the objects represented in the pictures have significance, each piece is executed in a format and scale that I found appropriate to the material used, the image and the context suggested. Hence, the varied scale one finds throughout the works.

Method and process

The drawings

The series of drawings developed from my preparatory sketches done during my fieldwork in the Eastern Cape during the winter of 1999. Most of the sketches are of the initiates that I asked to sit for me. These images were later manipulated in the studio to produce these large drawings executed on brown paper. A variety of materials and techniques were used. These include: watercolour, oil and chalk pastels, acrylic, oil paints and collage. An area of brown paper was first primed with white acrylic. The drawings were done in watercolour over which chalk pastels were applied. In some parts oil paint and pastels were used to complete these drawings. Smaller drawings that were done separately using the same method as above were then collaged to the bigger ones to suggest tension and contradictions. The result of this manipulative play resulted in a half-real element and distortion of the images. The use of the goat image plays an important part in the understanding of the ritual of *ulwaluko*, hence the goat iconography that dominates in all the drawings on paper.

The drawing, *Pain is Change*, represent the pre-circumcision stage which in Xhosa is either called *ukukhonya or ukugubha.*[47] This is one of the crucial moments in the boy's life that needs both physical and spiritual upliftment. Here the boy is rendered in an emotional state contemplating his coming moment that will change his social status for life. The goat's image that towers over him symbolises its importance and the role it plays as a sacrificial animal that is imbued with ritual significance and sacredness among the Xhosa people.

The Paintings

The paintings are closely linked to the drawings both in terms of the use of colour and subject matter. As in the drawings, in the initial stages preparatory small sketches were later transferred to a large canvas using oil paints. Later, fabric and blanket and beads (Plate 3) were collaged onto the particular works. A soldering iron was used to draw into and onto these images, especially on the blanket areas.

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[47] A period when the boy visits all his relatives informing them about his coming initiation and organises what these days one can call a farewell party. In this gathering of boys and girls the boy is announcing to his peer group of his decisions to undergo initiation.

These paintings are both a physical and psychological visualisation of specific moments in the ritual. They are intended to give a glimpse of the things that are likely to happen, yet the reading and interpretation remains open to the individual viewer in relation to their understanding and desire to prise open or construct meaning.

The Blanket Series

The blankets that I have used are specifically those that have been used by initiates during the seclusion period of *ulwaluko*, mine included. The body is the most natural site and means of visualising the physical, metaphysical and psychological 'realities' that accompany the living and the dying process. A series of nine blankets first stretched on masonite boards and images, using charcoal, were drawn on the stretched blankets. The iconography is that of cropped bodies of initiates, focused on the genitalia. Through the burning technique using a soldering iron they are made to appear as if they are embedded or branded into the blanket through this process of burning, making visible only a part of the body. In some of the images drawing ink and acrylic and oil paint are lightly used to create red and white highlights.

The soldering iron is basically a practical tool. In the creative process I have used it to depict the body parts on which both the ritual is sited and associated injuries may occur. The body is thus a site of both ritual and risk, of pain and transcendence. The imagery of mutilated penises, metaphorically represented by cutting and burning, alludes to the injuries of initiates, their maiming, loss and pain.

I knew from the onset and it was my intention, that some of the images might be disturbing to a number of viewers. The primary purpose in portraying these disconcerting images was to reveal and conceal some of the differences that are signified by the circumcised and the uncircumcised penis. This sign of difference is one that shapes some of the tensions and conflicts between those who are circumcised and those that are not. The cut functions as a symbol through which exclusion and inclusion to the society of men may or may not occur. These images portray the crucial body part (the genitals of the initiate) to the viewer as an on-your-face reality. The aesthetic here is one of unadorned confrontation.

The Skin Series

Beside their selection and application, these materials have symbolic value, meaning, are of great significance and contingent to the subject studied, and for me are used as analogy for the initiates bodies, especially the penis and its foreskin.

This series of works made on untanned hides of sheep and goats, together with the Blanket Series represent the inner or core body of the work and its contents. They embody both physically and psychologically-generated memories of the ritual of *ulwaluko*, and its importance to me. The series developed from the idea of the sacrificial animals, cattle, goat and sheep, most often used during the ritual. Besides the manner of their selection and application, these skins and materials used have symbolic value and meaning. The skins are of great significance, hold many levels of meaning and are closely bound to the subject studied. They are used as an analogy for the body of the initiate, especially the penis and foreskin: also for the inner spirit of the individual, its vulnerability and potential for transcendence.

The celebration of life and inevitable mortality of humans is invoked by the skins.
A sacrificial slaughtered sheep or goat parallels the death of the childhood of the initiate in the bush, which in the context of *ulwaluko,* symbolises both the life-taking and life-giving experience that can only be accessed through physical participation. The 'death' of the boy in order for the birth of a socially-affirmed 'man' to occur, is authenticated by the cut of circumcision, outwardly visible only in actions and behaviour associated with Xhosa constructions of manhood. The skins for the first three works were collected in Engcobo and the rest bought in Langa from the meat sellers. These skins were first dried using salt. After this process vigorous ironing using sandstone softened these skins. Then sheep shearing scissors were used to cut the wool, creating both a marked surface as well as a perfect working ground.
Images were drawn onto the skins using the soldering iron, after which they were mounted on boards. Then cut-out blanket and fabric pieces were pasted on with wood glue creating a collage. Sand was pasted and left to dry overnight, providing an undercoat and background. Later the cow dung added another layer on top of which drawings were made using charcoal, chalk pastels, oil paint and white clay.

The same process used to create the Blanket Series was applied in the creation of these works. These included cutting with a sharp razor, burning with open flame and soldering iron, and tinting with *ingceke*, red paint, and brown drawing ink to suggest bleeding. The skins like the blankets are analogies for both the initiates' bodies and the foreskin. The methods used in the creation of the works also allude to violence and pain and reflect the potential dangers that are witnessed in our present day practice. On another level they refer to the fragility of the human being, the skin as the interface between the inner being and the outer world, and the potential of the individual for transformation.

9. ENDNOTE

Among the Xhosa people there is a stereotype that a circumcised individual automatically becomes a man. This betrays what it is or might be to be a man. Many people expect some magical transformation once they have cut the foreskin. However to the disappointment and loss of themselves, families, communities and society they behave in an unmanly manner having failed to achieve responsibility and transformation as human beings. The concept of manhood need be critically re-examined and reaffirmed if *ulwaluko* is to retain any significance in the contemporary world.

In conclusion I must say it is noteworthy to hear the cries and anger that black Africans express when white artists use black subjects as the theme of their works, while they are silent when 'other' blacks do the same thing. It is also noteworthy that, although being an insider, it has been difficult for me to be given the permission to document my own culture while outsiders are permitted to do so. I think there is a need for a self-critique that not only implicates the 'other' but also looks critically at the black community and questions and evaluates cultural biases.

In the light of the loss of meaning and the destabilisation of traditional rituals in our society these issues need be addressed with urgency. In addition to the concerns expressed in this dissertation I wish to emphasise the relevance and need to transform traditional rituals in this changing society, and to reimbue them with their essential ontological values and purpose.

10. INDEX OF WORKS

Drawing Series.

Plate 1. Time will Tell 1999.

Water colour, oil and chalk pastel, acrylic and oil paint on brown paper

910 x 1236 mm

Plate II. Pain is Change 1999.

Water colour, oil and chalk pastel, acrylic and oil paint on brown paper

920 x 1220 mm

Plate III. Umtshilo 2000.

Water colour, oil and chalk pastel ,acrylic and oil paint on brown paper

920 x 1220 mm

PLATE I

PLATE II

PLATE III

Painting Series.

Plate I. Untitled I 1999.

Oil paint, Blanket on canvas

900 x 1510 mm

Plate II. Untitled II 1999.

Oil paint, Blanket, fabric and dung on canvas

900 x 1510 mm

Plate III. Untitled III 2000.

Oil paint, Blanket, fabric, paper and beads on canvas

900 x 1510 mm

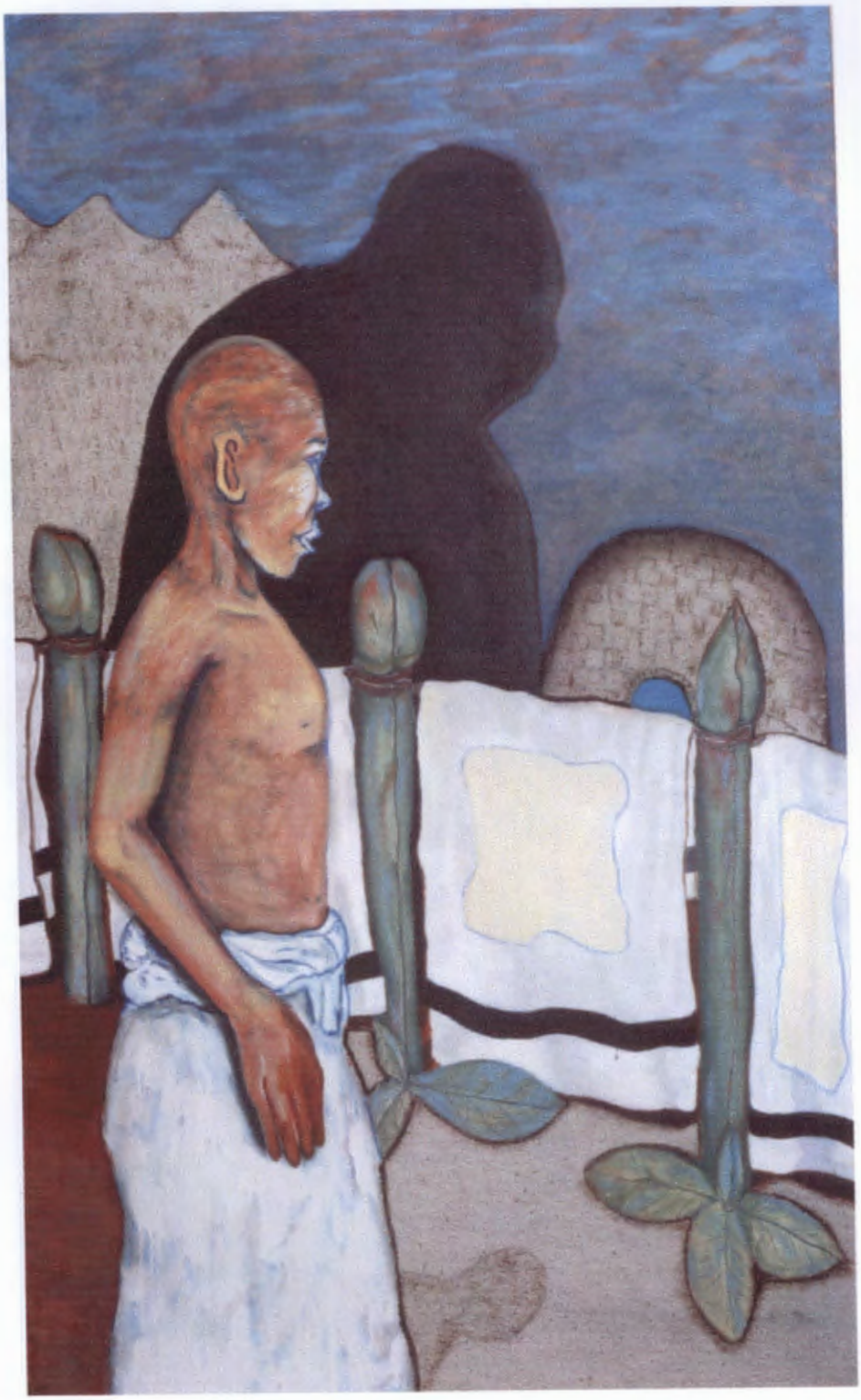

PLATE I

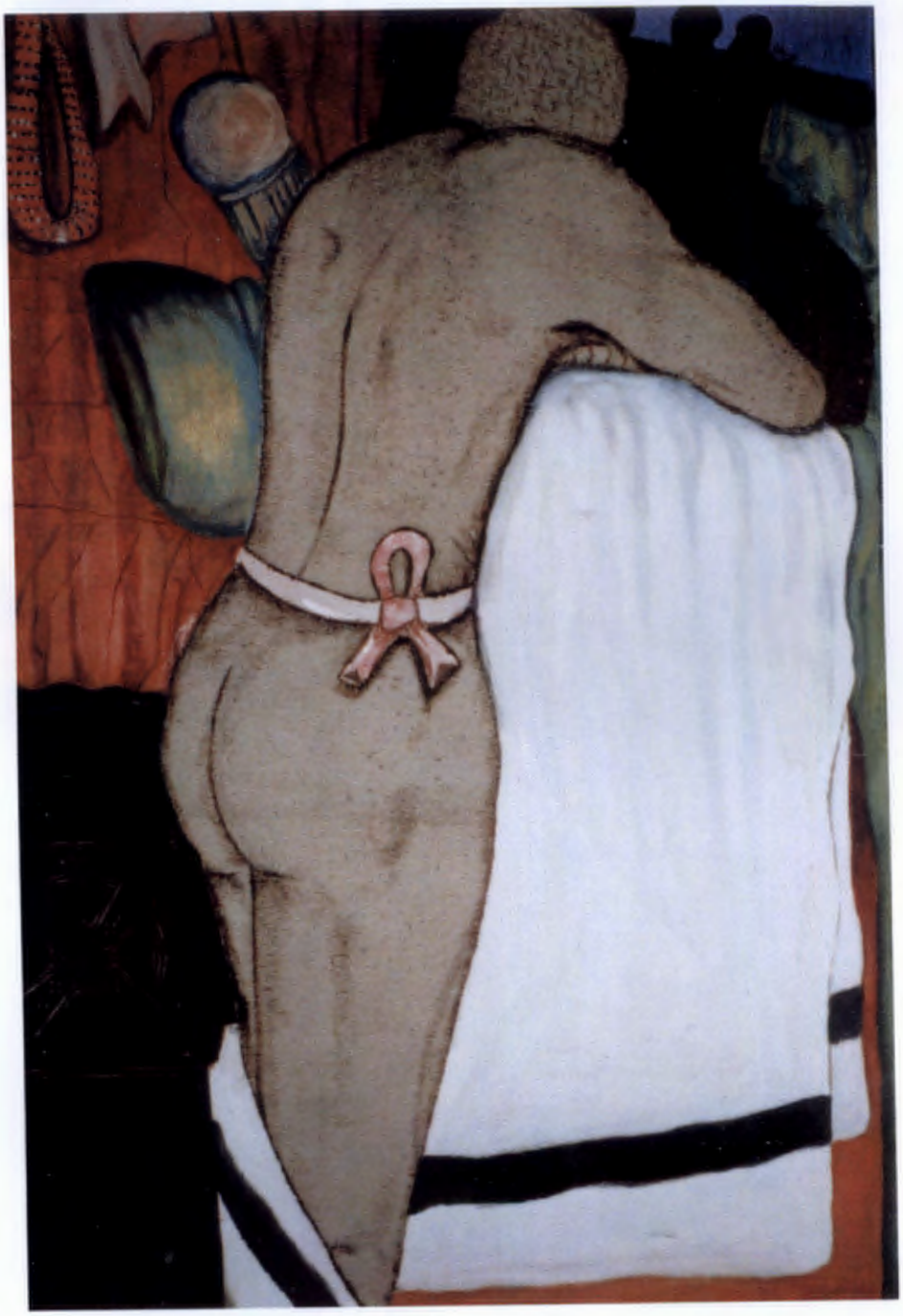

PLATE II

PLATE III

Blanket Series

Plate I. Untitled I 1999.

Charcoal, drawing ink, blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate II. Untitled II 1999.

Charcoal, blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate III. Untitled III 1999.

Charcoal, blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate IV. Untitled IV 2000.

Charcoal, blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate V. Untitled V 2000.

Charcoal, blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate VI. Untitled VI 2000

Charcoal, blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate VII. Untitled VII 2001

Charcoal, oil paint, drawing ink and blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate VIII. Untitled VIII 2001

Charcoal, oil paint, drawing ink, fabric and blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

Plate IX. Untitled IX 2000

Charcoal, goat head, maize bag, white clay and blanket on board

505 x 800 mm

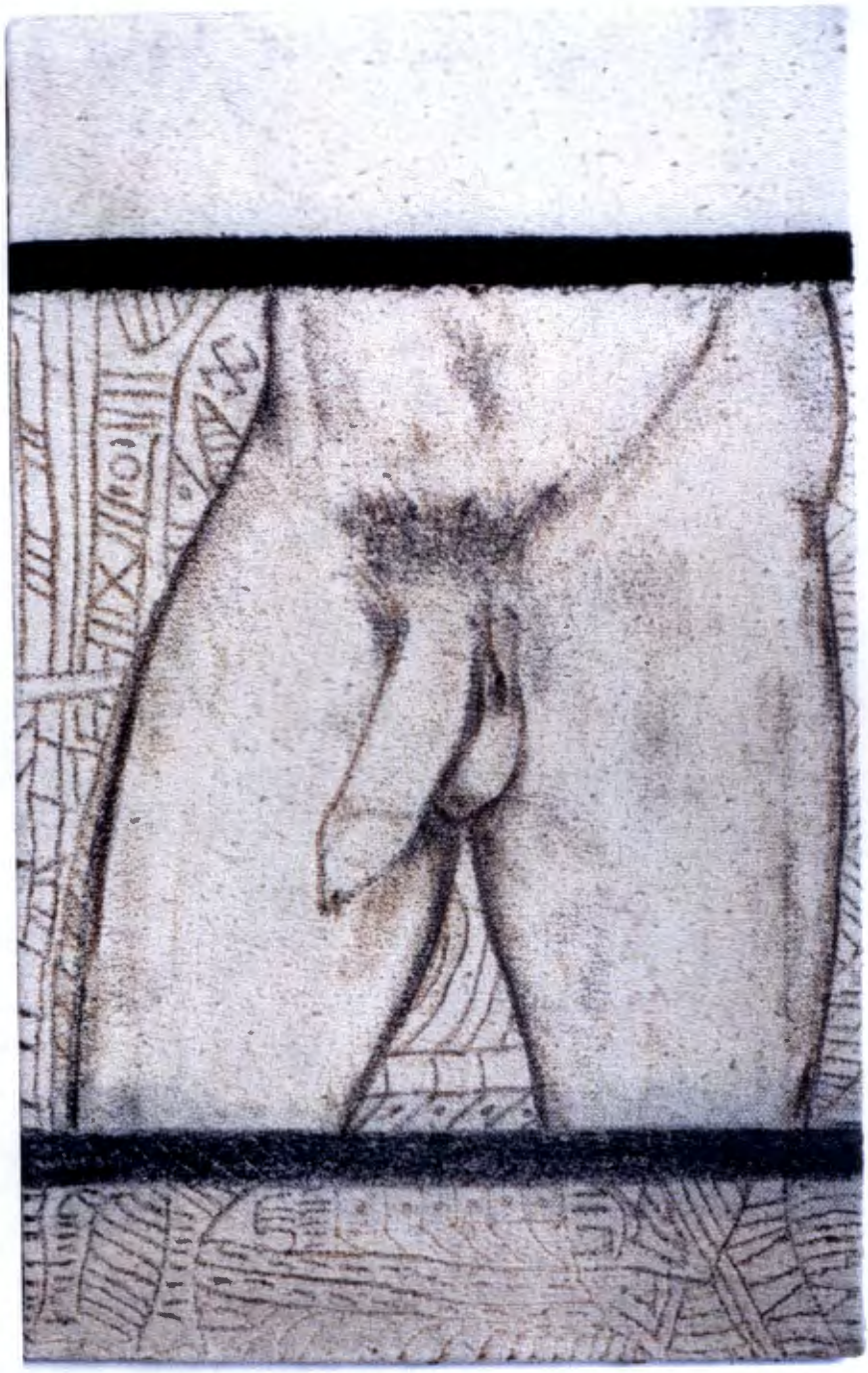

PLATE I

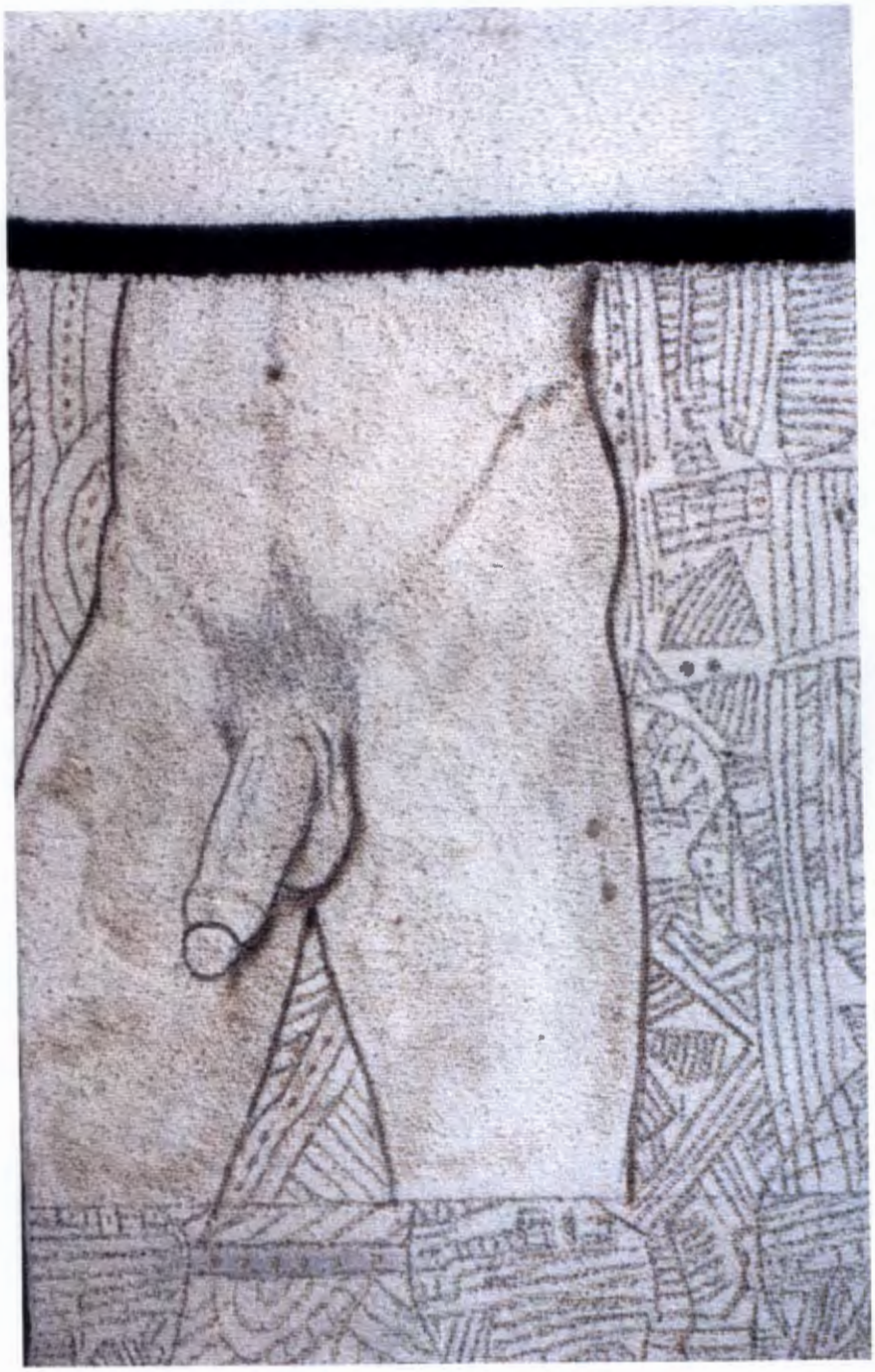

PLATE II

PLATE III

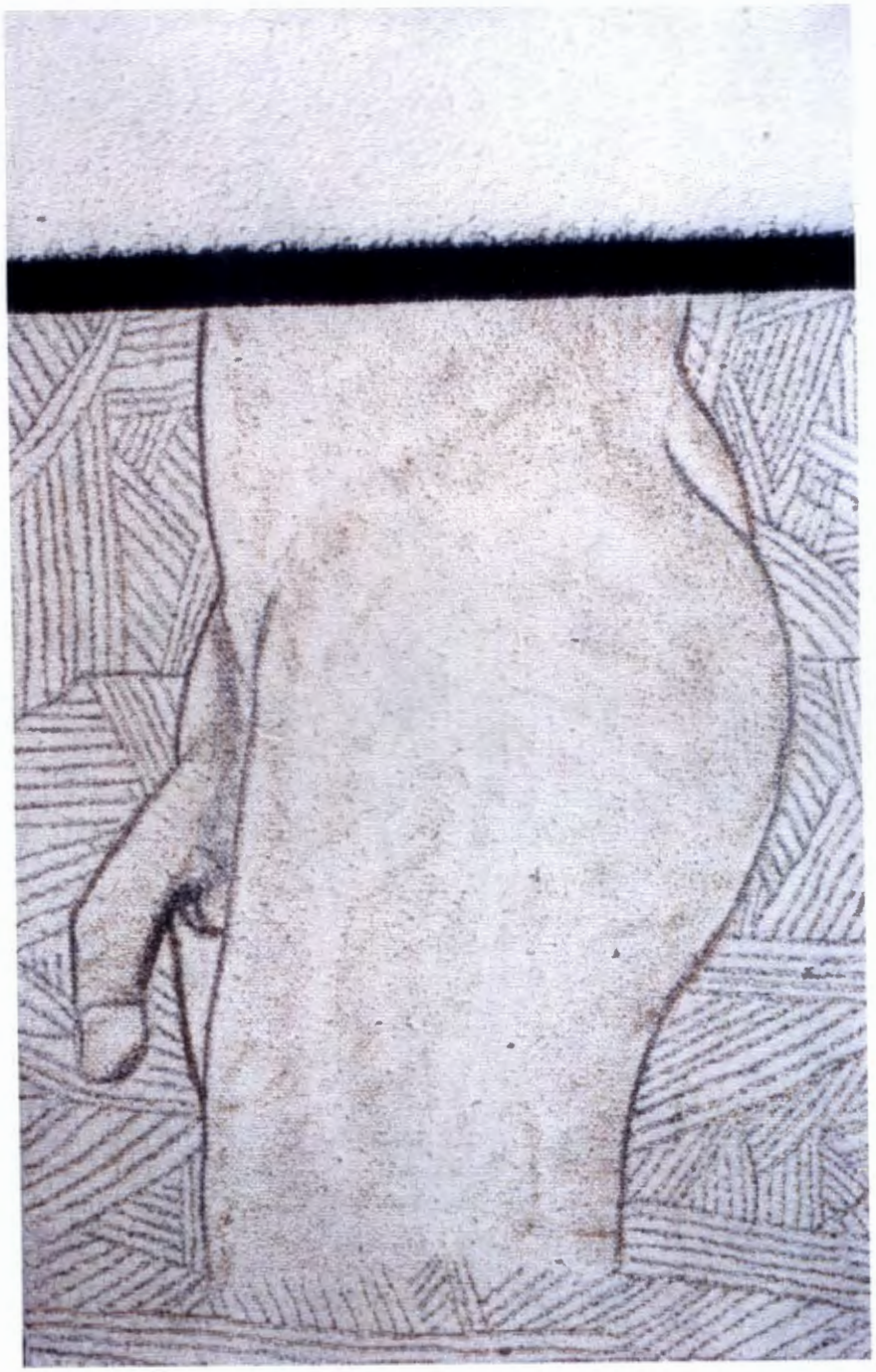

PLATE IV

PLATE V

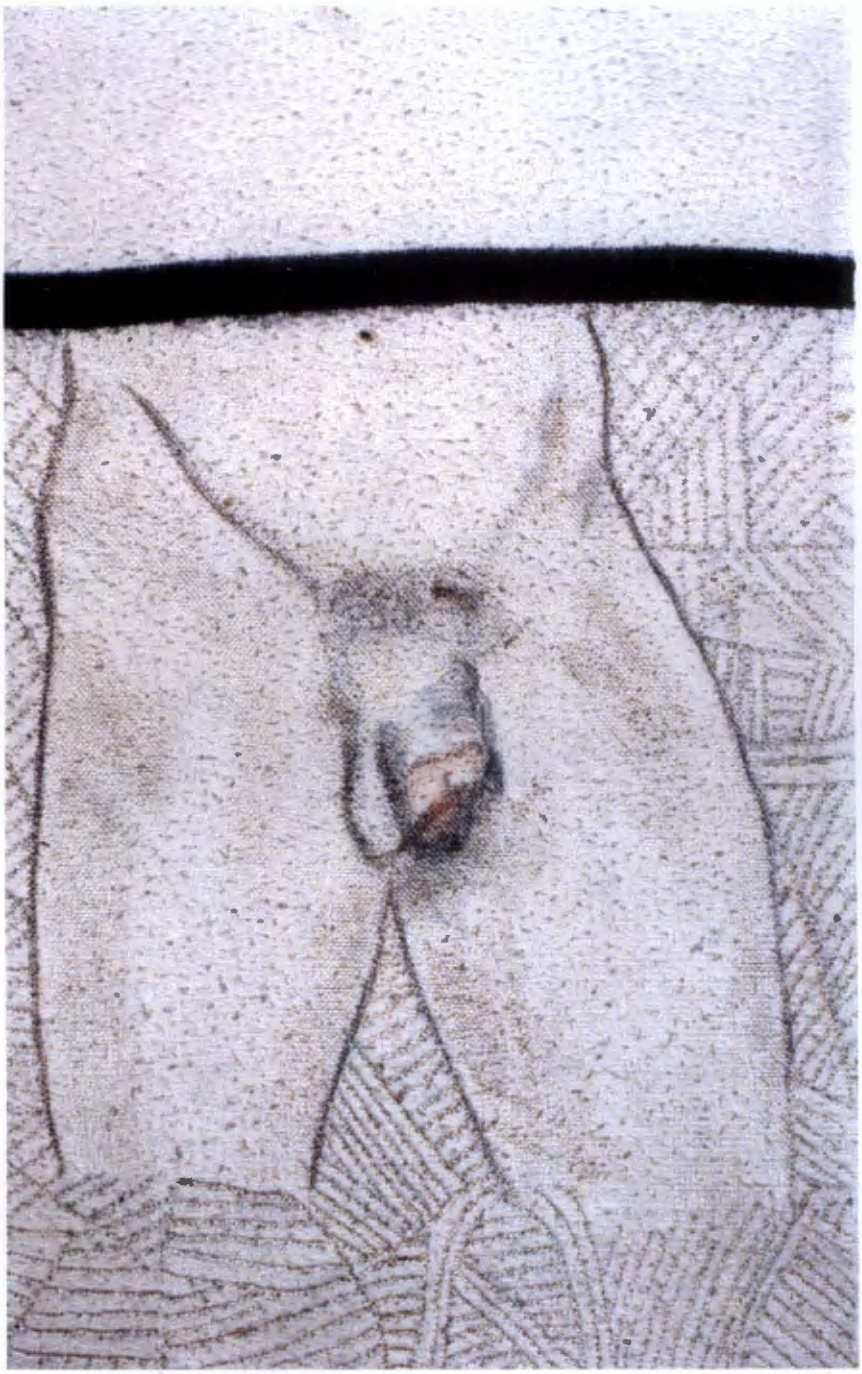

PLATE VI

PLATE VII

PLATE VIII

PLATE IX

Skin Series.

Plate I. Untitled I1999.

Sheep skin, dung, white clay, fabric, ground pigment, blanket on board

914 x 1194 mm

Plate II. Untitled II 1999.

Sheep skin, dung, white clay, blanket, oil paint, and chalk pastel on board

914 x 1194 mm 1035 1218 mm

Plate III. Untitled III 2000.

Sheep skin, dung, white clay, fabric, oil paint, chalk pastel, blanket on board

914 x 1194 mm

Plate IV. Untitled IV 2000.

Sheep skin, dung, chalk pastel, blanket on board

1035 x 1218 mm

Plate V. Untitled V 2001.

Goat skin, dung, white clay, oil paint, blanket, drawing ink, pastel and charcoal on board

1035 x 1218 mm

Plate VI. Untitled VI 2001.

Sheep skin, dung, white clay, fabric, oil paint on board

1218 x 1392 mm

Plate VII. Untitled VII 2001.

Sheep skin, dung, white clay, oil paint, and blanket on board

1218 x 1392 mm

Plate VIII. Untitled VIII 2001.

Sheep skin, dung, white clay, oil paint on board

1218 x 1392 mm

Plate IX. Untitled IX 2001.

Sheep skin, dung, drawing ink, fabric, wood on board

1227 x 1405 mm

PLATE I

PLATE II

PLATE III

PLATE IV

PLATE V

PLATE VI

PLATE VII

PLATE VIII

PLATE IX

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